

## Annex 4b: Code of Practice minimum standards on Services for Prepayment Meter Customers

**This Code of Practice minimum standards outlines the minimum actions required to fulfil the obligations detailed in Condition 34 of the Electricity Supply Licence and Condition 2.9 of the Gas Supply Licence and other relevant licence conditions. This Code of Practice should be no more than two clicks from the homepage on the supplier's website.**

### Information Provision for Prepayment Meter Customers

(a) provide advice, information, services and facilities, including the availability of emergency credit, which will assist the Domestic Customer to avoid being without a supply of electricity (gas) at particular times or in particular circumstances; Condition 34, 3 (a) Electricity Supply Licence, Condition 2.9.3 (a) Gas Supply Licence.

In order to fulfil the above licence condition suppliers must

- provide an explanation of what a prepayment meter is and ensure that customers receive instructions on the use and operation of the prepayment meter before it is installed or at installation.
- use best endeavours to ensure that customers understand the tariffs and charges for using a prepayment meter and the supplier's policy on refunding credit balances.
- provide details on the amount of emergency credit associated with the meter and an explanation of how emergency credit works.

- provide details of how to access information on vending facilities in the customer's area, including the location and hours available.
- ensure that where a prepayment meter is installed in order to collect outstanding debt, the supplier makes reasonable endeavours to ensure that the customer fully understands the terms and conditions of the repayment arrangement before the installation of the prepayment meter and the implications for their payments and outstanding debt (i.e. the actual amount to be deducted along with per cent of debt) and what to do if they have difficulty maintaining debt repayments.
- provide customers with information about how debt will be recovered i.e. on a per vend basis but advise that times of lower usage may be a good opportunity to reduce their debt.

(b) instructions for the operation of the prepayment meter system, including token availability, emergency credit and other such facilities; Condition 34, 3  
 (b) Electricity Supply Licence, Condition 2.9.3 (b) Gas Supply Licence.

In order to fulfil the above licence condition suppliers must

- when the meter is installed and upon request at any other time, at no charge, provide instructions on how to operate the meter which are expressed in clear, simple and concise language, and in a format which makes it easy for a person not familiar with the operation of a prepayment meter to understand. These instructions must also be available on the suppliers' website.
- provide instructions on how and where payments to the account can be made.

- if requested, use its best endeavours to provide the operating instructions in a language other than English or another format such as Braille.
- where applicable, provide details on how the customer can access up to date information on the amount of their debt, the likely length of time to repay the debt and how their tariff for debt recovery has been calculated.
- ensure that the customer can reasonably access facilities to top up the prepayment meter. (Suppliers will consider issues such as internet access, mobility issues and the geographical coverage and location of nearest outlets where prepayment meter top ups are available).
- Electricity suppliers must:
  - (i) ensure prepayment infrastructure (Liberty system) is programmed to dispense the change of rate code (the 40 digit code), via the vending process, between 7 and 20 days period before the change in rate actually takes effect (tariff effective date). Each electricity supplier must adopt a consistent change of rate process and timeframe for every tariff change (regardless whether the tariff change is an increase or decrease). This means, for example, that if a supplier chooses to dispense the change of rate code 15 days before a tariff increase, they must also dispense the change of rate code 15 days before a tariff decrease;
  - (ii) use best endeavours to ensure that customers understand the process of how their meter is updated when there is a tariff change. This includes, but is not limited to, the actions that the customer is required to take to update their meter with the change of rate code (40 digit code). Suppliers must advise customers how many days before the tariff effective date they will receive their change of rate code;

- (iii) ensure that, for each tariff change, domestic prepayment customers are notified at least 21 days in advance of the tariff effective date of the process as outlined in paragraph (ii) above.

(c) details of where the Customer may obtain information or assistance if the prepayment meter or any device used to allow the Charges for the Supply of Electricity(Gas) to be paid through the prepayment meter is not operating effectively; Condition 34, 3 (e) Electricity Supply Licence, Condition 2.9.3 (e) Gas Supply Licence.

In order to fulfil the above licence condition suppliers must:

- provide the telephone number(s) for advice on use of meter, complaints and emergency service. One telephone number can service advice on use of the meter and complaints.

### **Suitability of Prepayment Meters**

d) details of the advantages and disadvantages of prepayment meters, including situations or types of Customer for which they are particularly suited or unsuited; Condition 34, 3 (c) Electricity Supply Licence, Condition 2.9.3 (c) Gas Supply Licence.

In order to fulfil the above licence condition suppliers must:

- list in the code of practice the advantages and disadvantages of a prepayment meter taking different customer groups into consideration
- use reasonable endeavours to seek to identify any customer for whom a prepayment meter may not be suitable especially customers who are of pensionable age, disabled or chronically sick. This process will

include assessing access to payment facilities. It is important that customers are capable of using any metering technology that is provided safely and that they can access the meter and access a location to purchase top-ups for their prepayment meter.

- proactively seek to ensure that customers are aware of alternative payment methods.
- for customers that are in debt, point out the benefits of prepayment meters in debt repayment. Installation of prepayment meters without the express agreement of the customer should be used as a last resort in the debt recovery process in order to avoid disconnection.
- ensure that for customers with a disability or older customers, that the meter is located in a position which is accessible to the customer and that the customer is able to operate the meter (for example are the buttons and display screens accessible for those with sight impairment or other disabilities). Where reasonably practicable and appropriate the supplier will arrange for the provision of special controls or adaptors and reposition meters to enable the customer to operate the meter.
- not install a prepayment meter in a household where a life support system or critical care medical equipment is required<sup>31</sup> (electricity only).
- where the supplier becomes aware that an existing prepayment customer is experiencing difficulties physically using the meter or accessing top up facilities, the supplier should work with the customer to make an alternative arrangement for payment.
- ensure that customers are aware that if they do choose to change supplier their options for vending may change

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.nie.co.uk/Customer-information/Critical-care-register>

## Payments for Prepayment Customer

e) details of any additional charges which may be payable for the use of prepayment meters and the basis on which these charges are calculated; Condition 34, 3 (d) Electricity Supply Licence, Condition 2.9.3 (d) Gas Supply Licence.

In order to fulfil the above licence condition suppliers must:

- make customers aware of any additional charges payable for the use of a prepayment meter and how these additional charges are calculated.
- advise customers of any charges which will be made for replacement of lost cards and the amount of such charges.

(f) information about the procedures the Licensee will follow when removing or resetting the prepayment meter, including the timescale and any conditions for removing or resetting it. Condition 34, 3 (f) Electricity Supply Licence, Condition 2.9.3 (f) Gas Supply Licence.

In order to fulfil the above licence condition suppliers must:

- provide customers with information on procedures, timescales and any other conditions for resetting or removing a prepayment meter.
- where appropriate, provide instructions on how to obtain a refund of remaining credit when the prepayment meter contract is terminated.

## Annex 5: Utility Regulator Workshop on Supplier Codes of Practice

### Organisations in attendance

- Advice NI
- Age Sector Platform
- Ballymena Borough Council
- Ballymoney Borough Council
- Bryson Energy
- Budget Energy
- CCNI
- CER
- Christians Against Poverty
- Citizens Advice
- Consumer Advice Centre
- DETI
- DSD
- Electric Ireland
- Energia
- firmus energy
- H&A Mechanical
- NEA
- NIHE
- Oaklee
- Phoenix Natural Gas
- Power NI
- Public Health Agency
- Royal Mail
- SSE Airtricity
- Strabane District Council
- University of Ulster

## **Annex 6: Respondents to Consultation on Implementation of Supplier Codes of Practice**

### **Organisations who responded**

- Advice NI
- Ards Borough Council
- Budget Energy
- CCNI
- Christians Against Poverty
- Citizens Advice
- Electric Ireland
- Energia
- firmus energy
- NEA
- NIHE
- Power NI
- SSE Airtricity
- Strabane District Council