



MONEY AND
MENTAL HEALTH
POLICY INSTITUTE



MENTAL HEALTH
ACCESSIBLE

A Money and Mental Health Policy Institute initiative



URGENT GUIDANCE FOR ENERGY PROVIDERS SUPPORTING CUSTOMERS WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

The cost of living crisis, and specifically soaring energy costs, will mean that millions more customers will struggle to pay their energy bills this year. This is particularly concerning for people with mental health problems - as our research¹ has highlighted that this group is already nearly four times more likely to be behind on energy bills.



1. www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/publications/the-state-were-in/



“

The rise has affected me in ways that I am embarrassed to admit. It has resulted in me not using my heating system or showering as often. The cooker has been about the only heat I have used when preparing the one meal I am allowing myself because I worry my direct debit will have to increase again.

”

We are extremely concerned about the rising cost of bills and the huge impact this will have on people's financial and mental wellbeing. Going into this crisis, people with mental health problems are three and a half times more likely to be in financial difficulty than those without.² We know that being in problem debt can cause or exacerbate mental health problems.

We appreciate that the cost of wholesale energy is out of the hands of energy providers. However you can choose how you support customers experiencing mental distress and how you treat customers who are struggling to pay their bills.

Providers who take steps now to examine how they can best support their customers and implement the actions from this guidance will not just minimise distress for customers, it's likely to have significant business benefits - including:

- Reducing the strain on customer services teams due to fewer calls
- Improved staff wellbeing through a reduction in distressing calls
- A reduction in customers defaulting due to proactive support offered to customers earlier
- Collection processes could be less costly if fewer customers end up on this journey
- Standing apart from competitors in the sector and demonstrating your commitment to customer experience and wellbeing.

We are calling on the energy sector to implement our urgent energy crisis guidance. Even small providers, who may not be able to take all these steps, should consider what they can do to improve the experiences of their customers and reduce strain on staff.



More than
420,000
people in problem debt
consider taking their own
life in England each year³

More than
100,000
people in debt actually
attempt suicide in England
each year⁴



2. www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/money-and-mental-health-facts/

3. www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/publications/suicide-and-debt/

4. Ibid

▶▶▶ Minimising distress caused by your communications

How you communicate with customers can have a huge impact on how they feel and interact with your firm. We urge all providers to pay particular attention to how they communicate missed payments and debt with customers. A sensitive approach to communications is also likely to benefit providers, as it will likely reduce the need for customers to call you. Your firm should:

- 1. Review the communications you send out about missed payments, debt and defaulting.** Ask yourself, could these be less intimidating? Could they offer more support? Are you letting customers know what to expect when they get in touch and if you are signposting to services which can help? Providers should examine the use of block capital letters, colours, language, tone and the positioning of support. Where possible, providers should test their debt communications with customers with lived experience of mental health problems. And providers should consider the channels they use to send out communications to customers and make sure to use a channel the individual customer is comfortable accessing.
- 2. Consider the whole customer journey for customers struggling to pay.** Your customers will likely visit your website for more information before making contact. It's essential that your digital content prepares customers, helping them understand what they need to do and what to expect when they get in touch. This will encourage help-seeking behaviour and prevent repeat calls. Simple prompts, like asking them to take a meter reading before calling, may help make getting in touch less stressful.
- 3. Enable customers to get in touch through multiple channels.** We know that 75% of people with mental health problems have difficulty with at least one form of communication channel,⁵ and often it's the telephone. Ensuring customers can get in touch with key teams – including collections – through web-chat and email, as well as the phone, will make these services more accessible and less anxiety inducing for a large number of your customers
- 4. Add live call wait time advice to your pre-recorded messages.** This will help manage your customer's expectations and help them decide if this is a good time for them to have what might be a challenging conversation with you.
- 5. Ensure your bills are clear.** Making information easy to understand with details on how to get in touch so customers can proactively reach out if they need additional support.

▶▶▶ Helping customers who are struggling to pay

Our research⁶ shows that of those who have seen an increase in their bills in the last year:

Four in five

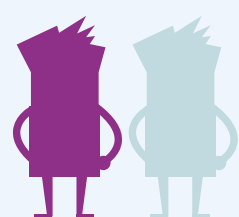
81%



had cut back on their energy use.

Over half

53%



had cut back on other essential spending.

One in five

20%



had borrowed money to pay bills.

As the cost of energy continues to increase, providers must consider what they can do to help customers who are struggling to pay. Providers should:

- 6. Proactively offer payment plans to those who are struggling to pay.** We know from our research many providers haven't reached out, and many customers won't know how to ask for this, so be proactive in offering it.
- 7. Ensure customers are made aware of discounts and support schemes they may be entitled to,** including the priority services register, and Warm Home Discount scheme while enrolment is not automatic. This will help ensure those who qualify for extra support actually receive it.
- 8. Making sure your tariff options are clear** and customers understand the most cost-effective way to pay.
- 9. Proactively get in touch with customers who might be at risk of missing a payment** and offer support before they default.

"I have tried and tried to speak to someone at [energy company] to ask why my usage has gone up so disproportionately and to have my meter checked but without success. I've even been cut off and sent back to the initial answering message."

– Expert by experience

5. www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/publications/accessessentials/

6. www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/enery-crisis-mental-health-problems/



Equipping your staff with the right knowledge and skills

Your colleagues are going to see both an increase in contact from customers and an increase in very distressed contact, which both colleagues and customers may find challenging. You should consider what you can do to improve this experience for both colleagues and customers. The energy crisis is likely to go on for some time – possibly years – so providers should think about both the quick ways they can upskill colleagues to have difficult conversations and consider investment in areas like training, which will likely be beneficial in the long term. Providers should:

- 10. Ensure your colleagues are trained to identify customers who may be vulnerable and need additional support.**
- 11. Ensure colleagues understand how mental health problems can affect customers** and the different support customers may need as a result.
- 12. Remind colleagues to take the time to summarise key bits of information for customers** and advise customers on what they might want to note down so they have next steps to take away.
- 13. Provide colleagues with up-to-date signposting guidance and ensure they feel confident using it.**

The steps suggested above can help customers manage expectations and prepare for difficult conversations, which in turn may reduce the number of people who call in distress or find it hard to control their frustration.



Using data to proactively support customers

Providers have access to valuable data through prepayment meters, smart meters and engineer visits. Insights from this data might indicate someone is vulnerable or struggling to pay. Providers should consider if they could use these insights as prompts to offer proactive support.

- 14. Where possible, providers should use the data they have available to identify self-disconnection and self-rationing,** and proactively offer support to these customers
- 15. Providers who have taken on new customers from collapsed providers should get in touch with these customers to let them know what's happening** and give them a chance to disclose any additional needs they have.

To work with us or for more information

Please get in touch with Alice Rose, Head of Strategic Partnerships. Alice leads our Mental Health Accessible programme which provides bespoke consultancy incorporating the voice of lived experiences for essential service providers. alice.rose@moneyandmentalhealth.org



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The Money and Mental Health Policy Institute is an independent registered charity (number 1166493).

We're working for a world in which the vicious cycle of money and mental health problems is broken, so that we all have an equal chance of financial security, regardless of our mental health; and everyone's mental health can flourish, regardless of their financial circumstances. We develop practical policy and solutions, working in partnership with those providing services, those who shape them, and those using them, to find out what really works. Everything we do is rooted in the lived experience of our Research Community, a group of 5,000 people with personal experience of mental health problems.