

# Government Agrees Measures With UK Energy Suppliers to Support Vulnerable People Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

Rob Broom and Henry Davey

Rob Broom (associate) and Henry Davey (legal director) take a look at the new emergency measures agreed by the government and the energy industry to protect the domestic energy supply of those most in need during the disruption caused by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

## The Citizens Advice Call for Emergency Measures to Protect People Pushed Into Poverty by COVID-19

Ahead of the government publishing emergency legislation to address the COVID-19 pandemic, Citizens Advice was calling for measures to ensure that vulnerable people and low-income families who are self-isolating are not pushed into financial hardship because of the outbreak, highlighting that those at particular risk include 7 million people in the UK without savings to fall back on, 5 million self-employed people, and those in 1.5 million low-income jobs that do not qualify for statutory sick pay.

## BEIS/Domestic Energy Supply Companies: Agreement

On 19 March 2020, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) released a press release announcing that new emergency measures with the energy industry have been agreed by the government to protect the domestic energy supply of those most in need during the disruption caused by COVID-19. The emergency measures (which Citizens Advice has given its backing to) include:

- **UK consumers with pre-payment meters** who may not be able to add credit can speak to their supplier about options to keep them supplied (according to a government statement, this will benefit 4 million customers).<sup>1</sup> These options include nominating a third party for credit top ups, having a discretionary fund added to their credit, or being sent a pre-loaded top-up card so that their supply is not interrupted.
- **Energy customers who are impacted financially** as a direct or indirect result of COVID-19 will also be supported by their supplier. Based on individual circumstances, this could include:
  - Considering reassessing, reducing or pausing debt repayments and bill payments for domestic customers in financial distress

- Considering referring customers who are struggling to pay to third-party debt advisers such as StepChange and Citizens Advice
- Suspending credit meter disconnections (except in cases of safety, theft and vacant properties)<sup>2</sup>

Ofgem has advised all customers using older electricity meters to leave the meter box unlocked if they need someone else to top up the meter. Smart meter customers should be able to top up remotely, such as by phone, mobile application or online.

Ultimately, suppliers will deal with issues on a case-by-case basis, so the best thing affected customers can do is to contact their provider as soon as possible.

Secretary of State for Business and Energy, Alok Sharma, said:

“While friends and family will play a role in helping people impacted by the coronavirus, we recognise there will be many customers who will need additional support and reassurance, particularly those who are financially impacted or in vulnerable circumstances.

The government has committed to do whatever it takes to get our nation through the impacts of this coronavirus pandemic. Today, those most in need can rest assured that a secure supply of energy will continue to flow into their homes during this difficult time.”<sup>3</sup>

Hard-up energy customers will surely take comfort that these new emergency measures will protect them from high bills and having their energy supply cut off during what are unprecedented times.

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<sup>1</sup> Gov.uk, Press Release, “Government agrees measures with energy industry to support vulnerable people through COVID-19”, 19 March 2020, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-agrees-measures-with-energy-industry-to-support-vulnerable-people-through-covid-19>, accessed 20 March 2020.