

# ENERGY SUPPLIER CUSTOMER SERVICE RATED

Energy firms receive an astounding 60m phone calls a year to their customer service departments. Our research shows some may be buckling under the pressure

There are many reasons why you would want to call your energy supplier. You might have a question about your bill or energy tariffs, or perhaps you want to submit a meter reading?

Almost 90% of contact with energy firms' customer service happens over the phone – a total of 60m calls a year – so you'd think that it's in companies' interests to make sure you receive an efficient and speedy service.

But our investigation reveals that, in a single call, you could be left waiting up to 29 minutes before your call is answered by a person. And while the quickest supplier, Ebico, picked up in an average of 21 seconds, Npower's average waiting time for customer service was the longest overall at 17 minutes and 5 seconds.

We believe that two minutes for your call to be answered by a person is a fair benchmark –

## Your biggest bugbears when calling energy suppliers' customer service departments

When the phone number is not a freephone number

**39%**

Having to wait a long time on hold before speaking to someone

**31%**

Going through an automated system before speaking to someone

**26%**

Automated messages being played while you wait, such as 'your call is important to us'

**22%**

In March 2013 we asked 896 GB adults with responsibility for their energy bills about the things that annoy them when calling the customer service department of their energy provider



**HAVE YOUR SAY** Have you been frustrated during a call to your energy supplier where you've been stuck on hold listening to how important your call is? Or have you received exceptional service from an energy company? Tell us more about your experiences at [www.which.co.uk/energycalls](http://www.which.co.uk/energycalls)

something that 10 out of the 16 energy suppliers we called were unable to do.

To find out just how long companies leave you waiting, we called 16 energy companies 12 times each at set times of the day. We recorded how long it took between finishing dialling the customer service number and getting through to a person. The average waiting time to speak to someone for each company is shown in the table, below right.

**PRICEY CALLS**

Waiting for someone to answer the phone is all the more galling when you're paying for the privilege – and we discovered that the provision of freephone and geographical numbers (often included in mobile phone users' free calling allowances) for existing customers is patchy.

- Seven of the 16 companies we looked at don't have a freephone number for customer service: Ecotricity, Eon, First Utility, Good Energy, Scottish Power, Spark Energy and Utility Warehouse.
- Four companies make you pay to call customer service while providing a freephone number for their energy sales line – Ecotricity, Eon, Scottish Power and Utility Warehouse.
- Seven out of 16 companies don't offer a geographical number for those calling from a mobile – British Gas, M&S Energy, Sainsbury's Energy, Scottish Power, SSE, Spark Energy and Utility Warehouse.

If you call one of the majority of companies that have an 0800 number and you dial from a landline, the call shouldn't cost you anything. But if you call an 0800 number from a mobile phone, you'll almost certainly have to pay. The telecoms industry regulator Ofcom is looking to change this so that, in future, 0800 numbers should be free from mobiles, too.

If you need to call one of the four companies that have an 0845 or 0844 number (Good Energy, Scottish Power, Spark Energy or Utility Warehouse) it could cost you between 2p and 11p a minute from a landline and between 12p and 40p a minute from a mobile, which can soon add up. Being put on hold for six minutes by Spark Energy could therefore cost you up to £2.40 from a mobile.

**GEOGRAPHICAL NUMBERS**

Some energy firms provide a geographical number (01, 02 or 03) as an alternative way to contact them. Depending on the type of mobile contract you have, calling a geographical number (such as the 01926 number for First Utility) can cost up to 35p a minute. If you have a contract with inclusive minutes, these geographical numbers are normally included.

But if you're on a pay-as-you-go mobile, waiting 17 minutes to speak to someone at >

**EXPERT VIEW**

**Take service seriously**

Sylvia Baron | Which? energy expert



Being left waiting on the phone when you want to speak to your energy company is simply not good enough – and even more so if you're paying for the call.

Unlike other sectors, you can't normally pop into a shop to speak to someone. A call is often the quickest way to get an answer to your query.

With more than 60m phone calls made each year to the energy companies' customer service departments, they've got to get it right and take customer service seriously. It's good practice for energy companies to have a freephone number if you want to speak to them. Which? would also like to see the following:

- Customer service calls being answered quickly by a human being – within two minutes at the very most. And companies treating their existing customers well – not prioritising sales over service.
- Energy companies striving to have a freephone number for landlines and, until 0800 numbers become free from mobiles, offering the option of a geographical number for mobile phones.
- Those companies that have a freephone number for sales also offering a free customer service number.
- Energy companies offering a callback option if waiting times are longer than two minutes.

One other plea: please stop telling us to go online when we're on hold. There is usually a good reason to call and speak to someone. And this can quickly become even more frustrating if we are being fed adverts while we're waiting – especially if we're the ones paying for the call.

	customer service number?	Freephone	(01, 02, 03) number for calling from a mobile?	Geographical number	Average waiting time
1	<b>EBICO</b>	✓	✓	✓	21 sec
2	<b>THE CO-OPERATIVE ENERGY</b>	✓	✓	✓	39 sec
3	<b>ECOTRICITY</b>	x <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓	53 sec
4	<b>SAINSBURY'S ENERGY</b>	✓	✓	✓	56 sec
5	<b>GOOD ENERGY</b>	x	✓	✓	1 min 3 sec
6	<b>EDF ENERGY</b>	✓	✓	✓	1 min 41 sec
7	<b>M&amp;S ENERGY</b>	✓	✓	✓	2 min 41 sec
8	<b>OVO ENERGY</b>	✓	✓	✓	2 min 44 sec
9	<b>SSE</b>	✓	✓	✓	3 min 36 sec
10	<b>EON</b>	x	✓	✓	4 min 4 sec
11	<b>SCOTTISH POWER</b>	x	✓	✓	4 min 26 sec
12	<b>BRITISH GAS</b>	✓	x <sup>b</sup>	✓	4 min 34 sec
13	<b>UTILITY WAREHOUSE</b>	x	x <sup>c</sup>	✓	4 min 42 sec
14	<b>FIRST UTILITY</b>	x	✓	✓	6 min 13 sec
15	<b>SPARK ENERGY</b>	x	✓	✓	6 min 30 sec
16	<b>NPOWER</b>	✓	✓	✓	17 min 5 sec

<sup>a</sup> But you can use the 0800 sales number to get through to customer services <sup>b</sup> 0300 number for Pay-As-You-Go Energy customers only <sup>c</sup> Customers with a Utility Warehouse mobile contract can dial '150'

**17 MINUTES ON HOLD**

Npower left us on hold for 17 minutes on average – here's what the company said when we asked it why: *'We're disappointed by these results. The investigation was conducted when calls*

*were abnormally high, prior to a temporary closure of our contact centres for three days. This was to allow us to transfer customers to a new system. However, we're not complacent. We want*

*to improve our service; one aspect is the speed we answer calls. Since April, we've recruited an additional 150 people in our contact centres and our average call waiting time in May was less than two minutes.'*

ILLUSTRATION BY: ALBERTO ANTONIAZZI

Npower could cost you more than £5. In fact, it's generally cheaper to call an 0800 number from a pay-as-you-go phone.

### **SLOW TO HELP, QUICK TO SELL**

We found that many firms are slower to pick up calls from existing customers than they are prospective ones. Of the big six energy providers, all but Eon were quicker to answer calls when we previously called their sales number – see 'Lucky dip energy sales', March 2013, p22 – than when we called their customer services this time. For example, Npower took on average 1 minute and 40 seconds to answer sales calls but 17 minutes and 5 seconds to answer customer service queries.

### **A number of companies offer a free callback service when they're busy – especially welcome if you would otherwise have to pay for the call**

Consumers also told us that they find automated choice systems ('press 1 for bills') annoying, but not all energy companies use these. Customers of companies such as Ebico or Ecotricity are put straight through to a person. Automated systems were more common with the bigger suppliers – British Gas, EDF Energy, Eon, Npower, SSE and Scottish Power.

And what happens while you're waiting is also important to you. Being played messages such as 'your call is important to us' is a bugbear for a fifth of the people we spoke to. We found that some companies, such as British Gas, Scottish Power and SSE, even played advertising messages while you wait, which is another cause of frustration.

A number of companies do offer a free callback service when they're busy, which is especially welcome if you would otherwise have to pay for the call. But ultimately we think that it would be best if you didn't have to wait too long in the first place. Co-operative Energy, Ebico, Ecotricity, EDF Energy, Good Energy and Sainsbury's Energy (in partnership with British Gas), don't make you wait more than two minutes, and we think the others should do the same.

Customer service is just one indicator of energy company performance. Here we reveal how the energy companies shape up on a fuller range of measures including bills, complaints and the products they offer.

# More room for improvement

Every year we survey more than 10,000 energy customers to find out the best and worst companies (Which?, Feb 13, p32). And since 2012 we've added to this customer feedback by also measuring energy companies' processes and systems against best practice criteria devised by Which? energy experts.

In our 2013 analysis, we've scrutinised the processes, practices and performance of 13 major and smaller energy suppliers, scoring them on 270 measures around customer service, bills and communication, products and marketing and

complaints. We use this analysis to offer feedback to the suppliers and tell them how we think they can improve to better serve their customers. We'll keep you updated on progress.

The major energy providers, covering around 98% of the market, did well on many of the criteria we looked at (see below). They tend to have the right processes in place – for example, offering long opening hours for their customer service call centres. But the good processes don't always seem to make customers feel more satisfied with them, as our customer

## How the big six



British Gas' complaints literature is very good, including guaranteed service standards that say how much compensation you could be entitled to – British Gas is the only company to list these in its printed complaints procedure documents. It is also the only company to offer customers on prepayment meters the facility to top up their gas meters online without leaving the house. And we like its new bills. But we would encourage British Gas to remove exit fees on all its variable-rate tariffs, and we'd also like to see its call-waiting times improve.



EDF had the best bills of all suppliers in our view – it clearly shows the energy you have used and how much you owe. Bills are short and concise with all the important information on the first page, including the billing period, the tariff you're on and a call to action to provide meter readings. It also provides information about energy use and alternative tariffs using personalised projections in its annual statement. But it is the only supplier which has longer opening hours for its sales department than its customer service department. We'd like this to change.

satisfaction survey showed. There, the major energy suppliers generally did less well than most of the smaller suppliers.

If you're looking to switch energy provider, it is therefore worth checking the results of our customer satisfaction survey where Good Energy scored best (85%) and Npower worst (39%) – see [www.which.co.uk/satisfaction](http://www.which.co.uk/satisfaction) for more.

### WHAT MAKES A GREAT ENERGY COMPANY?

When it comes to good practice, we want energy suppliers to do the following:

- Automatically refund account credit when it gets to a set, low threshold.
- Provide clear information on how to complain, all in one place on energy bills, and with a

freephone number. Suppliers should provide more information about the Energy Ombudsman and let you know when you are eligible for compensation.

- Bills should be concise, and easy to understand and navigate. They should clearly show when they are estimated, and prompt you for meter readings.
- Clearly separate annual statements from the bills, and give all the important information necessary to switch more easily.
- Not treat price increase notification letters as an opportunity to push more expensive tariffs. They shouldn't be a list of excuses about the hardship of being an energy supplier. There should be clear information telling customers how much their bills will go up by in pounds and as a percentage.



- Make tariffs simple and easy to understand, with no hidden charges or cancellation fees. We don't like variable tariffs that make you pay a cancellation fee

if you switch, and we don't like discounts that actually act as penalties (i.e. you don't get the discount unless you stay with that supplier for a year).

# compare

What they do well, and how they can make things better



We like the fact that Eon will automatically refund you any balance on your account if you're in credit by as little as £5. Eon didn't do as well as some of the other major suppliers in our best practice assessment, though. It doesn't offer a freephone number for its customer service department as it does for its sales line – this is something that we would like Eon to change. We would also like to see it reduce the average waiting time for customer service calls, which our research found to be just over four minutes, as well as remove the exit fees on all its variable-rate tariffs.



Npower is one of the only major suppliers that doesn't ask you for lots of personal details to give you an online quote. We also like the fact that Npower has a freephone number for both sales and customer service, as well as providing geographical numbers for customers calling from a mobile phone. However, it took far too long to answer our calls to its customer service department (see p23). We don't like the fact that its direct debit discount (£100 for dual fuel) is paid annually and not monthly, as we feel it acts as an indirect exit penalty.



Scottish Power did pretty well on the range and clarity of information it provides to its customers who complain. But we'd like to see it reduce its minimum for the amount of credit you need to have accumulated before you can get an automatic refund – it's currently three months' worth of direct debit payments (about £350 for an average bill). We were also disappointed to see that it provides an 0845 customer service number, but a free 0800 sales number. It also resolves fewer of its complaints as quickly as its competitors.



We like the fact that you can contact SSE's customer service centre using a freephone number. When writing to customers about price rises, it clearly gives a comparison of the prices before and after the price rise, which we think is useful. But it could do better by providing key information about the price increase at the beginning of the letter, rather than later on. The way it deals with complaints is satisfactory. But the names of its tariffs do not clearly state the type and term of the tariff, which is not very helpful – it could be clearer on this.

# Get the best energy deal for you

Compare the market to make sure you are getting all the discounts you can, and check out our customer satisfaction scores

Over time, many consumers have ended up on their supplier's 'standard' tariff, which is often one of the most expensive. Until tariffs are made simple and easy to compare (see more on our pricing campaign, below right), the best way to find the cheapest deal is by using a price comparison service.

But before you do, think whether you want a variable tariff – which might be one of the cheapest now but can go up or down in the future – or whether you'd prefer the certainty of a fixed tariff. If you go for a fixed-term deal, make a note of when the deal ends and remember to review the market when it ends, or you risk being put on to the standard tariff.

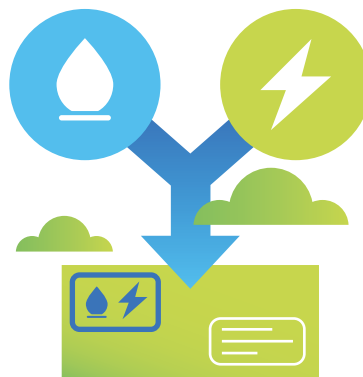


## COMPARE THE MARKET

Use a price comparison site, such as Which? Switch – a free and impartial service to compare energy deals. Visit [www.which.co.uk/switch](http://www.which.co.uk/switch) or call 01992 822 867.

People who have switched with this service have saved an average of £217\*. Have your annual energy statement or recent bills to hand to find out your gas and electricity use before you start comparing – it will make your comparison more accurate.

\* Based on 53,459 households who switched energy supplier using Which? Switch and The Big Switch between 1 September 2011 and 31 August 2012.



## GET DISCOUNTS

Paying by direct debit and getting your gas and electricity from the same supplier often gives you additional discounts. Most of the best deals now also require you to manage your account online.

## LOOK AT CUSTOMER VIEWS

While price is important, it might not be the only factor to influence your choice of supplier. Check how other customers score each provider before switching. In our last survey, Good Energy scored best with 85%, while Npower scored worst with 39%. Find the customer satisfaction scores for each supplier at [www.which.co.uk/satisfaction](http://www.which.co.uk/satisfaction).



## WHICH? SAYS

Energy is one of the sectors consumers are least satisfied with. We want to improve this industry and have developed a very comprehensive set of best practice criteria to raise the bar in terms of processes and practices. We will share our in-depth analysis of the companies' practices with the energy providers and we'll give them clear advice on what they need to change and improve to serve consumers better. While some suppliers have good processes in place, it doesn't seem to be filtering through to customer satisfaction, so we will continue to survey consumers annually on how satisfied they are with their energy providers to give you comparative scores you can use when choosing your energy provider.

## OUR PRICING CAMPAIGN

Rising energy prices are a real financial concern for consumers, but complicated tariffs make it almost impossible to find the cheapest deal. Which? wants energy prices to be clear and simple.

This is why we want to see the introduction of a single unit price for energy tariffs, in the same way petrol prices are displayed, to enable you to easily compare prices and find the best deal at a glance.

Join our call for simple energy prices by signing our pledge at [www.which.co.uk/affordable](http://www.which.co.uk/affordable)



**GO ONLINE** For all things energy-related - from how to use less electricity and avoid getting overcharged on your bills, to the types of energy grants available - take a look at [www.which.co.uk/energy](http://www.which.co.uk/energy)