

# **Guidance for Heat Network Suppliers on signposting to Energy Ombudsman in the event of unresolved complaints**

## **Introduction**

For any complaint process to work effectively it's important for the individual complaining to be made aware of their right to access Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) services. It's also essential that consideration of complaints is achieved within reasonable timeframes.

## **What is signposting and why is it important?**

If a Heat Network Supplier is unable to address a consumer's complaint, they should make them aware of their right to raise a dispute with Energy Ombudsman as the designated ADR provider. We refer to this as signposting.

Consumers should be signposted to our service when their complaint has either:

- a) reached a "deadlock" position, where the parties involved aren't able to agree a resolution and have reached the end of the complaint process; or
- b) been unresolved for more than eight weeks.

Effective signposting shows your commitment to customer care. When signposting to our service, Heat Network Suppliers should explain our role and provide our contact details.

## **1. Guidance for both eight-week letters and deadlock letters**

### **1a. Providing information on the Energy Ombudsman**

In line with the energy scheme and complaint handling standards, Heat Network Suppliers will be expected to provide customers with the following information, prominently placed in eight-week and deadlock letters:

1. Energy Ombudsman provide an independent and impartial Alternative Dispute Resolution service that is free for our consumers to use.
2. Resolutions can include: an apology; an explanation of what went wrong; a practical action to be taken to correct the problem; and/or a financial award.

3. Heat Network Suppliers have to accept dispute resolutions proposed by Energy Ombudsman, but our consumers can choose to reject them.

## **1b. Personalisation, language and tone**

Heat Network Suppliers should apply the following principles to both letters:

- Use plain and simple language to ensure accessibility.
- Personalise the letter appropriately to the consumer as an individual, using an appropriate degree of formality, to ensure the consumer understands its importance.
- Where possible and appropriate, provide specific details of the consumers's complaint within the body of the letter. Include a detailed case update and demonstrate ownership of the consumer experience.
- Letters should be empathetic to the consumer and considerate of the issues they may be facing using an apologetic tone as appropriate.
- The letter should clearly explain how to make contact with you to discuss the complaint, providing any relevant reference numbers, contact details and office opening hours.
- Make it clear to consumers how they can contact Energy Ombudsman.

To support the eight-week and deadlock process and to ensure letters are issued at the correct time, we would recommend that Heat Network Suppliers set up a system to monitor complaints. This would enable them to log the complaint, monitor its age and set an alert to trigger signposting letters being sent for complaints older than eight weeks. Being able to re-open a complaint if the same problem reoccurs, rather than needing a customer to log a new one would also be good practice.

## **2. Guidance for eight-week letters**

It's important that reference to the letter being an eight-week letter (i.e. the complaint has been unresolved for more than eight weeks) is in a prominent position. Include a clear statement of your position to demonstrate ownership of the complaint and outline the options for what happens next.

### 3. Guidance for deadlock letters

It's important that reference to the letter being a final position or deadlock letter is in a prominent position. Include a clear statement of your final position which enables the consumer to make an informed decision based on whether your offer will still be available if they escalate their complaint to Energy Ombudsman. For example;

"If you choose to escalate your complaint to the Ombudsman, our goodwill offer will be withdrawn. This enables them to consider your case from a neutral position and avoids confusion. They may decide on a different award which may be more or less than our original offer, or they may ask us to reinstate our offer."

In addition, the letter should include a statement informing the consumer that they have a time limit of 12 months from the date of the deadlock letter to approach Energy Ombudsman.

### FAQs

#### Is it the Heat Network Supplier's responsibility to evidence signposting?

We expect you to show that you've signposted your customer to our service by adding evidence to our complaint system. If no signposting evidence is added, our system will reflect that the complaint was not signposted.

#### How does Energy Ombudsman check a Heat Network Suppliers signposting?

We check all of the information provided for accuracy. If no evidence of signposting has been recorded, we will amend the data to reflect that.

## Example of an eight week letter

RE: You can now access a free, impartial dispute resolution service to resolve your complaint

Complaint reference number: [XXXXXX]

Dear [Customer]

Thank you for making us aware of your complaint. We're sorry that we haven't been able to resolve it yet.

We understand that your complaint was regarding [insert complaint info] and to date we've unfortunately been unable to address this, which has resulted in [insert effect info].

If you'd like to discuss this with us again then please call [insert number] or email [insert email address]. Our office is open [insert opening days/hours].

As eight weeks have passed since you first complained to us, you can now use Energy Ombudsman's free, independent, impartial dispute resolution service.

They'll ask you to provide all of the details of your complaint and any supporting information you can, before asking us for the same. They then consider all of the information to reach a conclusion on how to resolve your case.

Resolutions can include: an apology; an explanation of what went wrong; a practical action to be taken to correct the problem; and/or a financial award. You can choose to reject their resolution, but if you accept it, we have to act, and resolve the dispute in the way they propose.

You may contact the Ombudsman in any of the following ways:

**Website:** [www.ombudsman-services.org](http://www.ombudsman-services.org)

**Phone:** 0330 440 1624

**Email:** [enquiry@ombudsman-services.org](mailto:enquiry@ombudsman-services.org)

**Post:** Ombudsman Services: Energy, P.O. Box 966, Warrington, WA4 9DF

## Example of deadlock letter

RE: Unfortunately we're unable to resolve your complaint, but would recommend that you contact the Ombudsman

Complaint reference number: [XXXXXX]

Dear [Customer]

Thank you for making us aware of your complaint. We're sorry that we haven't been able to agree a way to resolve it directly.

We understand that your complaint was regarding [insert complaint info] and we've unfortunately been unable to address this, which has resulted in [insert effect info].

You're welcome to discuss this with us again, but it would seem that we're at the point where we can't agree on a resolution. In these situations we recommend contacting Energy Ombudsman who provide a free, independent, impartial dispute resolution service to our customers.

They'll want to know that you've received this 'deadlock' letter and will ask you to provide all of the details of your complaint and any supporting information you can, before asking us for the same. They then consider all of the information to reach a conclusion on how to resolve your case.

Resolutions can include: an apology; an explanation of what went wrong; a practical action to be taken to correct the problem; and/or a financial award. You can choose to reject their resolution, but if you accept it, we have to act, and resolve the dispute in the way they propose.

Please make sure that you contact them within 12 months from the date of this letter. Their details are:

**Website:** [www.ombudsman-services.org](http://www.ombudsman-services.org)

**Phone:** 0330 440 1624

**Email:** [enquiry@ombudsman-services.org](mailto:enquiry@ombudsman-services.org)

**Post:** Ombudsman Services: Energy, P.O. Box 966, Warrington, WA4 9DF

[Provide Heat Network contact details and office hours under sign off and signature]