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Nicola Sturgeon MSP
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22 August 2022

Dear Nicola Sturgeon

I am writing to you because you are meeting with the energy suppliers to discuss what more can be done to support people as energy costs spiral and households face a very worrying winter.

South Seeds is a registered charity based on the busiest high street in your constituency. We have been helping residents better manage their energy use at home for 10 years. Our energy officers hold face to face appointments with approximately 50 of your constituents per week. Our clients tell us about the current energy issues they are dealing with. Here are the three issues which negatively impact energy consumers the most...

A) Energy debt

If someone has energy debt, energy companies often expect a high repayment rate if paying with direct debit. This is unaffordable for many people and can lead to the debt escalating. Sometimes, a lower repayment rate is offered if a client can prove they have received debt advice. The main place for debt advice is StepChange's Scottish debt advisors and in our experience it is very difficult and time consuming to access this debt advice at the moment.

When customers can't afford a direct debit repayment plan offered by an energy company, the more affordable alternative is to switch to a pay as you go meter which will repay the debt over time as the customer continues to use their gas or electricity. Many suppliers claim (for various reasons) that they cannot install a prepayment meter for customers. However when debt collection is escalated by the energy company we have seen forced installation of prepayment meters on a warrant. Installing meters under a warrant will add additional fees to the

customers' bills. This system of dealing with customer debt does not seem to consider how the paying customer can best pay back the debt.

ACTION: At South Seeds we feel energy companies need to be more flexible and adaptable in taking payments from customers.

B) Consumers who are off supply

At South Seeds many of our clients are left off supply. This is usually caused because an engineer has been sent to a home and for various reasons they are unable to complete the job. The status of this incomplete job is then not communicated to the customer and/or the supplier. This happens most often when meters are replaced, often on warrant. The customer is often vulnerable and unable to insist the energy company finds out why they have been left off supply. The helplines for people off supply are for those customers experiencing a gas leak or power outage and useless for the many customers we see regularly off supply.

ACTION: At South Seeds we think energy suppliers need to have better communications with the engineers who are delivering their service in customers' homes. Helplines for customers off supply should be available to deal with all customers off supply.

C) Customer service

In our experience energy consumers often find it very difficult to communicate with their energy supplier. Many suppliers already have wait times of over 30 minutes - this will increase with the next big price rise.

When a customer finally gets through to someone who works for the energy company, they are often needlessly passed between departments before the query is resolved. Even then, it is not uncommon that a customer has to contact the supplier three or more times to resolve a single issue, such as an incorrect bill, a wrong address, or wrong communication preferences.

The only way to hold suppliers accountable for these issues is by making a complaint. We have found the process for making a complaint become harder and harder. While complaint procedures exist the practical barriers of making a complaint are becoming unreasonable. For example: Scottish Power lists an incorrect phone number on their complaint webpage, and SSE has an online complaint form which has not been working for months. We also have experience of customers being told they will be contacted at a later date with a complaint reference

number, which does not happen, so the complaint process then has to be started from scratch after time has elapsed.

ACTION: At South Seeds we feel energy companies should provide better customer service. This is more important than ever as prices increase.

We hope this information informs your discussions with energy companies on Tuesday 23 August. Do let us know if you would like further information.

Best wishes

Lucy Gillie
Manager South Seeds