

Radio Teleswitch Service (RTS): Electricity supply Licence Changes

Response from Citizens Advice Scotland

Key points

- Households with RTS meters should receive a replacement meter as quickly as possible.
- Suppliers should not replace RTS meters if that leads to households losing their electricity supply. In these instances, suppliers should support households via an appropriate tariff.
- Suppliers must do more to make engineer appointments available. Ofgem should undertake enforcement action if engineers repeatedly fail to attend scheduled appointments.
- Funding should be available to help people to cover the cost of RTS-related remedial works. Similar funding should be available to local authorities and registered social landlords.
- Updating the Smart Energy Code to permit the installation of cellular comms hubs in Scotland will improve the chances of installing smart meters successfully.
- Suppliers should take all reasonable steps to find an appropriate tariff for anyone who needs an RTS meter replacement.

Introduction

The Radio Teleswitch Service (RTS) switch-off has potentially harmful consequences for thousands of households. The switch-off comes at a time when people across Scotland are facing enormous challenges around energy affordability and debt. During the final three months of 2024, the Citizens Advice network in Scotland provided energy advice to over 9,000 people. The overall average energy debt that people bring to Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABs) in Scotland is £2,500. Average energy debt in rural areas stands at £3,100. The negatives impact of RTS switch-off, which could include people's heating not working or not switching off, will worsen these problems.

Given the risks that the RTS switch-off poses to people in these circumstances, anyone with an RTS meter should receive a replacement meter as quickly as possible, including when they switch suppliers. However, suppliers should not replace RTS meters if it results in a household losing an electricity supply. In either circumstance, suppliers must ensure that people are not worse off financially due to the RTS switch-off by finding them an appropriate tariff.

Barriers to RTS meter replacement

The current pace of replacing RTS meters is too slow. Advisers in our network are seeing an increasing number of people seeking advice about the RTS switch-off. Worryingly, many of them are elderly, living with long-term health conditions, experiencing other forms of vulnerability and/or

living in Scotland's most deprived. Our advisers have highlighted a range of practical issues that are hampering the replacement of RTS meters.

Securing engineer appointments

Arranging an engineer visit has proved challenging for people with RTS meters and our advisers. For example, Patricia told her local CAB that she phoned her supplier several times to book a slot to replace her RTS meter. During her most recent call, Patricia's supplier told her to contact them again at the end of March.

An adviser in one CAB spent eight hours securing appointments for two people with RTS meters. Having to devote this much time to RTS meter replacements is creating extra strain for advice services that are already stretched to breaking point. In both cases, the engineers did not attend the appointments. When the CAB adviser contacted the suppliers to arrange new visits, the supplier informed them that no appointments were available. Suppliers must do more to make appointments available. Ofgem should consider what enforcement action it can take if engineers repeatedly fail to attend scheduled appointments.

Failed engineer appointments

Our advisers have identified a worrying trend of engineers leaving properties without replacing RTS meters because the work is too complicated. These situations appear prevalent when a household's existing metering arrangement is complex, when meter replacement requires remedial works and when households have solar PV panels. Suppliers must liaise more closely with local authorities and Registered Social Landlords to secure agreements about who will carry out any additional work required to complete RTS meter exchanges.

Some households may require remedial work, such as rewiring, to facilitate suppliers replacing their meters. There should be funding available to help people to cover the costs of these works. Additionally, resources should be available to local authorities and Registered Social Landlords to help them fund remedial works for their tenants.

Harry's CAB has supported him with ongoing energy affordability, debt and food insecurity problems. He has solar panels installed on his council house, which were incompatible with his current meter. An engineer visited Harry's home but said it was too complicated to replace his RTS meter and left without completing the work.

Engineers have visited Dugald's council house three times but have not replaced his meter because the supplier and local authority cannot agree on who is responsible for relocating a 24-hour switch from inside to outside his home.

Eric has had four failed engineer visits to his council house. The problems in Eric's case ranged from an engineer saying it was too complicated to replace the meter, an engineer not attending at the agreed time to work with a council electrical contractor and a dispute between Eric's supplier and his local authority about solar PV panels installed on his roof. Both Dugald and Eric – pensioners living on their own – are extremely concerned about not having their meters replaced before the switch-off date.

Smart meter connectivity

Problems and confusion around smart meters drive demand for energy advice. During the final three months of 2024, our network helped over 1,800 people with smart meter issues. Smart meter problems are causing issues for people impacted by the RTS switch-off, particularly for those living in rural locales. Updating the Smart Energy Code to allow the installation of cellular comms hubs in Scotland will give suppliers a better opportunity to install smart meters successfully.

Donald visited his local CAB due to worries about losing his heating after the RTS switch-off. A CAB adviser tried to arrange a meter replacement, but Donald's supplier said no appointments were available in his area due to poor smart meter connectivity.

Leonard approached his CAB because his heating had stopped working after he switched suppliers. The switch had stopped Leonard's RTS meter working correctly and his new supplier installed a smart meter. However, the smart meter failed to connect properly and had to be replaced. Although this second smart meter worked, Leonard built up arrears caused by the faulty smart meter and required CAB support with this problem.

Margaret lives in a rural area; her house has an RTS meter. She has experienced two failed smart meter installations because it is difficult to get a signal at her property. Her supplier has told her she will need another engineer visit to investigate the problem.

Billing

Our evidence shows that households with complex metering arrangements have experienced several problems after the replacement of their RTS meters. These problems appear prevalent in areas where properties have two meters: one for heating and hot water and the other for electricity. Anecdotally, the fact that these households have multiple MPAN numbers registered to them has also contributed to confusion. It is vital that suppliers ensure that people do not suffer financial detriment when their RTS meters are replaced. Suppliers should take all reasonable steps to provide people in this situation with an appropriate tariff.

Due to a learning disability, Betty faced challenges in understanding why replacing her RTS meter was important. Her CAB supported her to book a meter exchange appointment. After the meter was replaced, Betty received a £2,000 bill due to an incorrect reading from her previous meter. Although her CAB resolved that problem, Betty has become so concerned about her energy bills that she has switched off her storage heaters and uses a small portable heater instead.

Anna sought advice from her local CAB due to the billing issues she experienced, which have been caused by confusion around her meter type, tariff and smart meter operability. Anna received a £3,000 refund from her supplier in August 2024 but there are ongoing issues with the accuracy of bills that she is receiving.