



Glasgow and West of Scotland
Forum of Housing Associations

Meter issues in voids: membership feedback to GWSF, January 2023

Feedback was received from eleven associations as below.

We have encountered the same problems with utility companies taking long periods of time to answer phones the worst being Scottish Power and would happily be part of a collective complaint approach.

We were previously using Void Care but were dropped as a customer at short notice from British Gas, possibly due to not being valuable enough to them as a smaller landlord.

Since not being with Void Care it has become more and more difficult dealing with utilities for void properties particularly when meters are in debt, and where we have no top up cards given to us from the outgoing tenant. Where a void meter reset is required for example, this is most certainly having a negative impact on our void relet targets due to the matters noted in your email. It would be beneficial to get a picture of who other RSLs are using for void care and if any have been successful with recent new contracts.

I have also tried to change suppliers to voids in the hope that it may speed up the process as a new customer but have found with various suppliers that due to the current energy crisis they are not interested in taking on any new customers, the reason given is that they would not be able to offer a better deal than what you are currently on.

We are looking at a new way of dealing with the issue at pre-termination visit with tenants who have given notice to terminate. If found that the property has pre-payment meters, we are now looking at offering to top up the tenants' meters a week or so before the keys are due back and taking possession of any top up cards from the tenant. At this point as an incentive for the tenant we are ensuring that the meter is adequately topped up, possible £50 credit per meter as this cost ensures we should have credit on the meters when keys are returned, and we have the facility to top them up with minimum fuss. Although this may cost the Association money it will save on staff resources dealing with what can be hours making phone calls to utility companies.

On a more positive note, I have found that Utilita have a facility to top up a smart meter online. You don't need a top up card, all you need it the address, postcode and the meter serial number, you can then enter card payment details online to buy credit for this meter, I have found this helpful as it allows us to top up meters without any phone calls.

We have experienced a lot of issues with Scottish Power, most of the other providers seem to work well but SSE are starting to show similar issues since being taken over by Ovo.

We have an advice worker who is constantly on the phone to utility providers on behalf of our tenants, he has advised the following:

- Scottish Power are the worst company to get through to, can wait up to an hour and then they just cut you off, if they do answer they will only deal with one query at a time. The week before Christmas he spent 7 hours of his working week trying to get through to them with queries.
- They used to have a dedicated advisor line but this is now only for the use of CAB. This line was a bit better but again it still took ages to get through to them

Our void officer experiences similar issues that are mentioned in your initial email:

- Can spend hours on the phone waiting to get through them, they either cut you off or hang up. If you do get through they will only deal with one issue during the call. They put you on hold and then cut you off mid call so you are back to the start. A lot of our void teams time is taken up by hanging on
- They will not send out an engineer to reset meters with debt on them. They advise that the new tenant needs to organise this themselves and when the tenant does log this as an emergency the engineer doesn't turn up. We have had to clear outstanding debts on several meters so the tenant can go ahead and get heating or electricity.
- They will not attend properties without a member of staff on site, despite our void properties all having key safes on site containing the key to the property.
- If we arrange for a staff member to be on site they either turn up outwith the time scheduled or don't turn up at all.
- Their staff can be very unhelpful on the phone and we are regularly getting cut off by accident!

Hope this helps, but sounds like we are all experiencing the same issues especially with Scottish Power.

My opinion would be that it is same with these issues all round, supplier hold times for each department and each supplier are all significant hold times to get through. I have found with Scottish Power sometimes live chat can be a better/quicker response but not always. Also do not click the housing or landlord option, go through as a normal home move, it does help, maybe a little.

British Gas used to have a void care team who responded by email within 24 hours to off supply / meter exchange or resets, however since COVID this email address isn't in use and the respond times are weeks' if at all, when I ask on the phone about this team they say the team is not being used at the moment due to the price increase/people from that department being used elsewhere. I personally wouldn't say there are any best one to choose to go with at the minute and the struggle of suppliers not wanting to take on or switch others too.

If choosing to go with one supplier for all voids it would cause delay to relet times anyway as switching over takes 21/30 days for each property before fully creating account and awaiting the same time for the work to be carried out after that.

I completely identify with this. I can hold for an hour only to be cut off. I am told regularly that a card will appear to clear the debit and it never appears resulting in countless phone calls and a waste of time.

We currently use British Gas Voidcare and appear to get a reasonable service. Apparently, they were not taking on any new clients during Covid and only opened up again with a waiting room. They are quite particular with how they want information processed and if you don't comply they will drop you. I've attached link to join waiting room.

[Void Property Energy Management – British Gas](#)

We would be very happy to add our name to a collective letter of complaint.

We are often using up hours of experienced staff time on hold to energy companies (with Scottish Power being the worst for wait times and who appear to be the majority supplier in our area). We try to use junior staff to assist with these hold times where possible but often a more experienced member of staff is required to assertively push for some action and answer property specific questions they are being asked by call handlers.

Around 70% of the time we think we have a resolution following a call to reset a meter, but on returning to the property the smart meters have not been reset/new account prepay cards do not arrive in the promised timescale/RTI codes do not work, requiring another call to the provider – this is across all providers. Utility problems of meter resets, debt and trying to trace who the supplier is have led to an increase in void relet times, we also have had void voids where utility problems have resulted in a 6-7 week delay in reletting. Bulb caused us a major delay at the end of last year, poor communication between their teams and a long wait for an engineer's visit to reset the meter.

Having successfully used British Gas Void Care at another employer, I enquired about this here, in 2019 I was told we have too many pre-payment meters within our stock to be considered as a customer. My understanding now is that only landlords with stock numbers in excess of 5,000 are considered for new custom.

Regarding Scottish Power specifically - from around October I have been told they can only deal with one property per call. Any time I have had to call them in the last 3 months I have been on the phone for over 90 minutes. I tried to call them this afternoon relating to a void debt and the options are to press 1 if you are off supply, or 2 for other enquiries – when pressing 2 I'm told all call handlers are busy and to try another time before being cut off!

Our organisation is experiencing the same difficulties with Scottish Power. We do use the BGVC portal but if it is an Economy 7 or 10 meter BGVC will not take it over. If supply is with Scottish Power and there is significant debt on the meter they can refuse transfer over to BGVC. You can wait over an hour to get through and there are no separate options if you are a business or if you have no supply etc. Also having held on for a considerable amount of time, if you happen to be put on hold you get cut off and have to start the process all over again. This impacts on our timescales and void loss.

Their online chat facility was also down so you had no other means of communicating with them.

On a personal note, I had major issues trying to contact British Gas as they now only operate between office hours. They will not respond to email other than to tell you to call them on the number that you have already tried to be told to call back (due to the volume of calls) or have been left holding for several hours to get through only to be cut off and no live chat.

Extremely frustrating and costly.

Unsurprisingly we too experience problems when dealing (attempting to deal) with Scottish Power. Other energy companies most notably Scottish Gas are pretty good at

- a. answering the phone in good time
- b. answering the query
- c. responding effectively
- d. email facility to notify meter readings where it is a credit meter
- e. if prepaid meter, they will issue a card received within 2/3 days, alternatively they provide a code to re-set the meter

None of the above are dealt with by SP, issues we have experienced (almost every occasion):-

- a. Left on hold for as long as an hour at a time before being cut off
- b. Often when informing of the end meter reading, this information is not processed necessitating a further phone call
- c. In the event a call is successful, and a code is issued, very often the code does not work, necessitating yet another call, this has happened on more than one occasion to more than a few voids
- d. After navigating this minefield and all is set, often when we receive the invoice for the void period, the dates/meter readings do not tally with the information we had provided – yet more staff time taken to have this amended.

Overall, the service from SP is disgraceful, it has gotten to the stage that whenever there is a void the staff are exasperated if it turns out that the energy supplier is SP. We have lost countless number of hours in dealing with this particular energy company for what should be a very simple process and should only take a few minutes to resolve. Undoubtedly we have experienced additional void days e.g., no gas check, no Elec check until the power has been re-instated.

I'd be more than welcome to join any action to seek a resolution to this issue.

We encounter extreme problems when trying to get meters cleared at void stage with the majority of utility suppliers including Scottish Power.

We went down the route of having a preferred supplier (Utilita) and that did work well until they stopped taking on new customers.

We would notify Utilita when tenants gave us 28 days notice. Utilita would then arrange to transfer supply to them providing current supplier does not lodge objection e.g. large debt on meters. Utilita would ensure credit on meter when transfer completed which allowed us to do safety checks etc.

New tenants would not be expected to remain with Utilita if they didn't want to. Since the energy crisis Utilita do not take on any new customers and that position hasn't changed as yet.

I would agree a collective approach may help as I have also in the past went down the complaints route with Scottish Power which got me nowhere and, eventually, contacted the Ombudsman when the Scottish Power complaints process was exhausted, who advised they would not act on behalf of a Housing Association.

These supplier issues cause delays to our void turnaround periods, therefore, can prevent families moving into appropriate accommodation.

Let me know if I can help if collective approach agreed.

We use British Gas Void Care and we're happy with the service we get from them. The biggest issue we've had recently is getting Scottish Power (SP Energy Networks) to attend when there is a meter safety issue that requires an SP engineer. We had a void that had a tampered meter that Void Care couldn't take over until SP had been out to deal with the safety issue. Took best part of a year for them to attend to carry out the required work with several hours of staff time going round the houses at SP's call centres!

Like the original email said, I'm not sure if Void Care are taking on new clients, but we'd recommend them for this service.

This is a problem that we're also experiencing. Exactly the same issues as noted below. On one occasion we had a member of staff on hold for 3 hours and then the operative hung up so 3 hours wasted and no further forward.

We would be interested in a collective approach.