

GUIDANCE FOR SUPPLIERS

The 12 requests below are designed to better mitigate the risk of self-disconnection, or, if a customer has self-disconnected, to allow suppliers to respond in a way that may lead to an improved outcome for the customer.

As a charity we do not believe that suppliers are responsible for self-disconnection, however this advice is provided with the knowledge that those who self-disconnect are hard to engage with and therefore may assist suppliers in their thinking about how best to respond.

Our requests are evidence based and are rooted in what we have seen across our network and concluded from our research.

TOPPING UP

No	Request	Fuel Bank insight that led to this request
1	Make sure that customers can continue to top up on the high street or at a corner shop.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online top-ups are a game changer for some, but don't benefit those who are unbanked or who have lost access to credit. • Households in crisis who are likely to need emergency help are unlikely to have funds available online to top up, most online top up facilities do not allow a third party, family or friend to top up on somebody else's behalf. • Payments made to a bank for future energy top ups can be 'swallowed' by the bank as they recover any previous lending or debt.
2	Remove any lower limit to the value of any top up.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some of our Fuel Bank centres a quarter of clients talk about topping up with a single £1 coin, sometimes three times per day. • Some supplier policies that mandate the value of a minimum top up have a determinantal impact on some customers, with some stating that this causes additional worry and anxiety.
3	When historic daily or weekly charges are being collected, guarantee that a maximum of 50% of any top up is used to clear any missed payments, allowing at least half of all top ups to be used for future energy consumption.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is inconsistency between suppliers as to the policy that is applied if any weekly or daily charges are missed. This complicates the advice provided by the third sector, and at times can result in any crisis help being provided being used to purely repay a missed charge, rather than to provide energy/heat/warmth.

AVOIDING THE CRISIS BEFORE IT HAPPENS

No	Request	Fuel Bank insight that led to this request
4	Provide meaningful advice and guidance to pre-payment customers about support that is available if things start to go pear shaped, and what action a customer should take.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advice about how to avoid self-disconnection, when actioned by FBF clients, reduces the likelihood of clients returning for repeat help. FBF typically supports people less than twice. We know the advice works. 19% of customers who self-disconnect are likely to prioritise electricity over gas, resulting in higher costs to heat a home and hot-water using electricity alone.
5	Identify when top up behaviour starts to change – this may indicate that something is going wrong – and reach out.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although legacy pre-payment meters do not inform a supplier in real time that a meter has disconnected due to there being no funds, changes in top up behaviour do indicate that a customer may be starting to ration their energy prior to any self-disconnection. Some suppliers report initially contacting customers who haven't topped up three months after the last known purchase – at this point the situation will be much worse than it was at the point of self-disconnection.
6	Periodically review weekly or daily charges to make sure that these remain affordable and do not have a detrimental impact on customers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charges to collect debt may have been agreed by the customer or deemed to be affordable at a moment in time, but situations evolve. Most FBF clients report a deterioration in their financial circumstances that leads to then requiring Fuel Bank help, and therefore certain charges could be deemed to be no longer affordable. Customers are not routinely aware that previously agreed debt repayment plans can be renegotiated or put on hold if they become unaffordable. There is a variation in the value of the standing charges levied. High value standing charges, if not paid during summer, can have a detrimental impact on the customer as they start to top up for winter use and discover a material credit balance to be cleared.
7	Periodically review suitability of pre-payment to ensure that it remains a safe and reasonably practicable option for a customer. This includes checking that PPM remains suitable when a customer moves into a property, when there is a material change in customer circumstances, and periodically by review.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At the point of pre-payment meter installation suppliers are obliged to ensure that a PPM is a reasonably practicable option for a consumer. We see many cases where we would assess that a PPM no longer meets this requirement, however customers are largely unaware of their ability to request alternative ways to pay for energy. Suppliers tell us that some customers should not be followed up when they have not topped up, for instance because the property is used for short term holiday lets, but at the moment this information is not collected.
8	Drive a greater awareness of the need (and incentive) for customers to budget in the summer to build a credit that lasts throughout part of the winter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Late autumn and the turn on of central heating is when we see peak demand for Fuel Bank starting. Many people tell us that they were unaware how significant weekly winter top ups could be. Customers are not routinely prompted about the typical weekly or monthly payment that would be made by somebody who has an agreed payment plan with their supplier. Targeted comms prompting additional top ups for potential households at risk to prepare for future periods of high consumption have been reported as useful

OFFER SUPPORT WHEN REQUESTED

No	Request	Fuel Bank insight that led to this request
9	Make it simple for your customers to access help when they need it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emergency PPM support is not available seven days/week – although friendly credit may mitigate the need for a customer to contact a supplier out of hours, customers who reach out need to be supported regardless of when and how they contact their supplier. Only 9% of customers in crisis will contact their supplier, yet customers report that at times they reach out and are unable to communicate with somebody who can help. When this happens customers have a higher propensity to not reattempt contact. Fuel Bank customers often access support through alternative, often low-cost or free channels, including SMS or WhatsApp or email.
10	Ensure that meaningful and practical advice accompanies any discretionary credit that is offered. And is followed up.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 71% of FBF clients who have sought help and received a discretionary payment from their energy supplier report being given no further advice or actions to mitigate the likelihood of a repeat request.
11	Do not make support dependent on the customer making a payment to the supplier. The customer may be requesting help because they have no funds to top up their PPM.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We see examples of companies who will only offer to provide support or discretionary credit after payment of all or some of the outstanding balance on the account. Customers report that often a decision is made about whether support be provided by their supplier without any triaging or review of the customer's exact situation.
12	Do not signpost to other organisations with a promise or intimation of help and potential financial support as a way to simply objection handle.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We see repeat examples where some suppliers refer into the third sector with a message that advice AND emergency funding can be provided. This raises customer expectation and adds complexity to any support that the charity can provide.