

Ngerulmud electricity bills

Citizens Advice helped over 52,000 people with energy bill problems between January and October this year - equivalent to one person every two minutes. This is an 83% increase compared with the same period in 2020 (29,000), before the energy crisis.

Many billing issues were made worse by poor customer service: at least one in five cases had instances of poor service, such as agents failing to record important information, or customers forced to explain complex billing matters multiple times to different representatives

With energy costs soaring and debt at historic highs, billing issues risk pushing people's household budgets over the edge. Currently, suppliers can charge consumers for energy up to 12 months after it was used, meaning they have a full year to send an accurate bill (known as back-billing). This risks lumping customers with hefty, unexpected bills that they can't afford.

Citizens Advice's data shows a clear link between billing issues and energy debt. One in three people (34%) who sought advice about a billing issue between January and October this year were also helped with energy debt. One in five people (21%) who were helped with affordability issues were also helped with a billing problem. Addressing the billing issues that energy consumers struggle with could begin to rebuild trust in the energy market and prevent debt from escalating.

Citizens Advice is urging Ofgem, the regulator, to strengthen protections for consumers. The charity wants to see back-billing limited to six months for energy customers with smart meters, which would mean suppliers are incentivised to provide more timely, accurate bills.

A series of billing mistakes led to IT professional Thomas* not being charged for his electricity for a year, then hit with a ?2,500 bill in error - nearly double what he actually owed. The Energy Ombudsman ruled the bill was a mistake as it was based on a second electricity meter that did not exist at the property. Thomas said:

"When they sent the bill for ?2,500 my first reaction was just shock. That sent a shiver down my back. I was almost feeling guilty, like I'd done something wrong. Then that turned to anger when I realised it was completely their mistake.

"There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing but every time I called them they said they couldn't do anything until I updated the meter readings. At which point I said it's impossible because there isn't a second meter.

"It has taken seven months to get that second non-existent meter removed from the system. Not being able to get past the help desk and get any action, not being listened to. It just ground me down, that weight hanging over you for six months."

"Consumers simply can't afford to pick up the tab when something goes wrong. Ofgem must act to protect consumers by limiting back-billing and raising service standards, so people struggling with billing issues get the help they need."

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