



There are plenty of complaints of one sort or another about Npower

NPOWER GOES FROM WORST TO BAD

The dodgy doorstep selling days of Npower are over, says the energy regulator Ofgem.

But recent figures show the gas and electricity giant is worst for complaints about transfers – which includes when you’re switched to a new supplier without your knowledge – worst for electricity account complaints and joint worst for gas account complaints.

After a year of feeling Ofgem breathing down its neck, Npower finally managed to halve the appalling number of complaints made about its sales agents’ tactics; in April, Ofgem declared it officially ‘improved’. The regulator, which recently got powers to fine companies that break the rules, added that it was concerned about the general level of mis-selling by energy companies.

In January last year, Ofgem had demanded that Npower formally promise to tame its sales force. Npower introduced a range of measures, including

a ‘Doorstep Challenge’ code of conduct for sales staff, and met its deadline for improvement.

But consumer advocate Energywatch’s latest records as we went to press – which cover last September to November – reveal not only that Npower’s selling complaints still exceed the industry average, but that it outstrips its rivals for most categories of complaint.

Energywatch said: ‘Npower cut its selling complaints from stratospheric level to about cloud level. The company is performing badly with regard to other types of complaint.’

Last month, Energywatch held an industry summit to raise these issues, and launched a guide for consumers rating each company’s performance.

FURTHER INFORMATION
www.energywatch.org.uk

Be in or we break in

British Gas is upsetting customers by threatening to force entry if they’re not at home when staff turn up to read their gas meter – even when the company has failed to keep an appointment.

Gas suppliers must check your meter once every two years and can apply for a warrant to enter your home if they can’t get in any other way.

British Gas claims it would only ever use this power as a last resort, but we’ve heard otherwise from several customers. Intimidating letters, stating that British Gas is applying for a warrant, have been left for customers who are simply on holiday or out of the house when the meter reader calls.

Alan Powley received a letter from British Gas last November stating that it needed to gain access to read his meter. It set a date for the reading – in ten days’ time. After several attempts, Alan contacted British Gas to say that he would be out of the house for several hours on the specified date and it confirmed that the reader would call between 5pm and 8pm.

However, when Alan returned

home at 3pm the meter reader had already been and had left a card stating that British Gas would now be applying for a warrant to force access.

Alan rang British Gas to complain. It told him not to worry – if his home was entered in his absence, it would be in the presence of a police officer and British Gas would replace the locks and leave the keys at his local police station for him.

This is not an isolated case. Energywatch – the consumer advocate – told us it has had several other complaints.

Flatmates Hannah and Sarah waited until 1.15pm for a reader to keep a morning appointment and then phoned British Gas. They were told the reader was stuck in traffic – but no one turned up. When they complained, they were told that the reader had turned up at 8.58am and ‘no access was granted’. They made another appointment – and still no one showed. They then received a letter threatening to obtain a warrant stating ‘this is our last resort’.

British Gas claims it’s trying to make meter reading easier for customers. In order to avoid



Alan Powley feels he was threatened by British Gas, although it had failed to keep an appointment

estimated bills, customers can take their own meter readings and then phone, post or e-mail them back to the company. But a representative has to carry out the two-yearly safety check.

We think British Gas is not giving customers sufficient warning to be in before the warrant letter is issued. It needs to improve communication with its customers and arrange a mutually convenient appointment – and stick to it.

If there is something you’d like us to investigate, leave a message on the Inside Story Hotline on **0800 252088** (calls are free). We’re sorry but we can’t reply individually to the many calls we receive.