

Radio Teleswitching Project Newsletter

June 2023

With the arrangements secured to maintain the Radio Teleswitching Service (RTS) out to 31st March 2024, we have recently completed a series of bilateral sessions with Energy UK's electricity supplier members to get the latest updates on their readiness to begin the replacement of the old Radio Teleswitching metering equipment with new smart electricity meters. The focus of this Newsletter is to provide all interested stakeholders the very latest news on all things RTS related.

The key message throughout this newsletter is that for any consumer who relies on RTS equipment, preparations are now well underway to close-down the RTS system, and consumers should contact their electricity supplier at the earliest opportunity to arrange for their RTS equipment to be upgraded to a smart electricity meter. For some consumers, they may have to wait a little longer for their smart electricity meter upgrade. As a precaution for these consumers, discussions are already underway with the relevant RTS service providers to secure the ongoing operation of RTS into 2025. But, the key advice to consumers is to act now and contact your electricity supplier for a smart meter upgrade, rather than waiting any longer.

To assist consumer facing organisations, housing associations and Local Authorities, we have included a set of consumer/customer focused FAQs and Answers that we're encouraging organisations to include on their websites/with any consumer/customer comms that they may be planning over the coming months.

The preparations to close-down RTS are progressing at pace

Earlier this year, we secured an extension to the Radio Teleswitching Service that ensures ongoing transmission of Longwave Radio messages to RTS meters until the end of March 2024. Since then, the BBC have announced that it will now start moving content that has been traditionally delivered on Longwave Radio onto its Digital-based platforms from March 2024 – recognising that Longwave is reaching the end of its life as a transmission technology.

What this means is that once the BBC has no further use for Longwave Radio transmission, all other services transmitted using the same Longwave Radio transmitters will also end. What isn't clear at the moment however is when the BBC expects to complete the digitalisation of the existing Longwave Radio content.

In the meantime, discussions with the BBC are continuing with every expectation that the RTS arrangements can be extended into 2025, and Energy UK will begin a new piece of work to define how to achieve a gradual closing down of the RTS arrangements over the next 12-18 months with a clear objective of minimising consumer impact throughout the close-down period.

It's important that those consumers that rely on RTS have a smart meter upgrade as soon as possible

Once the RTS arrangement ends, there will be no radio messages sent to RTS metering equipment meaning that the way in which the RTS equipment controls the flow of electricity to storage and/or water heaters will become highly unpredictable. Consumers may no longer be able to rely on their heating switching on or off at the expected times during the day or night, and it may be the case that the heating could either stay on or off continually. It could also result in higher than expected electricity costs if the heating is stuck on continually.

Smart electricity meters are the natural technology upgrade for RTS – just like the move from Analogue TV to Digital TV. It is important to note that the electricity industry isn't developing any other RTS replacement technology. So, for consumers reliant on RTS equipment, having a smart electricity meter upgrade is the only option being offered as an upgrade to RTS by electricity suppliers.

If consumers are adamant in their refusal of a smart electricity meter upgrade, then they may need to engage the services of an electrical contractor at their own cost to make changes to internal wiring and the way in which they control their heating. In these scenarios, the electricity supplier may also be forced to change the customer's electricity tariff as they may no longer be able to determine how much electricity has been consumed during the cheaper off-peak rates – with the most likely result in consumers being charged a single, flat-rate for all of their electricity consumption – in most cases, resulting in higher electricity bills.

Although there is an expectation that RTS may be extended beyond April 2024, it's really important that consumers take action at the earliest opportunity to get their RTS equipment upgraded to a smart electricity meter. If consumers leave it too late, then electricity suppliers might not be able to offer an upgrade appointment before the RTS arrangements end.

Supplier Readiness

The good news is that most electricity suppliers have already started to contact their RTS customers asking them to get in touch with their supplier to book a smart electricity meter upgrade appointment. So far, customer response rates are fairly mixed with some suppliers reporting a better success rate than for non-RTS customers, with others seeing very little difference.

Work is now underway with electricity suppliers and Smart Energy GB to understand what types of messaging is having better success rates, and how Smart Energy GB can support electricity suppliers in raising awareness of the need for consumers that rely on RTS to get a smart meter installed at the earliest opportunity.

A few electricity suppliers might not be able to offer appointments for RTS equipment replacement until later in 2023 due to internal IT system migrations that are currently underway. As soon as those suppliers are ready to begin their RTS replacement activity, they will write to their customers offering them an appointment to get their smart electricity meter upgrade.

There are some situations where replacing the RTS equipment with a smart electricity meter is more complicated than others. RTS customers on some of the more complex 'electricity heating' focused electricity tariffs for example. We also know that there are some RTS customers that live in areas where connectivity to the current smart metering communications infrastructure isn't possible. Energy UK and electricity suppliers are continuing to make progress on solutions for these scenarios to make sure they are in place before the RTS arrangements end. Electricity suppliers will write to impacted customers to offer them an appointment to get their smart electricity meter upgrade once the solutions are available.

The key message for any consumer that has RTS equipment in their home or business is to contact their electricity supplier at the earliest opportunity, and their supplier will confirm if and when their smart electricity meter upgrade can take place.

Radio Teleswitching FAQs

What is the Radio Teleswitch Service, and what is it used for?

The Radio Teleswitching Service (RTS) enables Electricity Suppliers to switch large numbers of electricity meters between different tariff rates, and helps deliver specific electricity tariffs designed for customers who need to use large amounts of electricity for their heating and/or hot-water provision. Examples of this type of electricity tariff are Economy 7, Economy 10, Total Heat Total Control, Comfortplus/White Meter, Heatwise, Warmwise, Budget Warmth and others depending on where you live and who your Electricity Supplier is. If you're unsure if you have RTS equipment in your home/business, contact your Electricity Supplier who will be able to confirm this for you.

Which consumers have Radio Teleswitched meters in their homes or businesses?

For many consumers who use electricity as their primary heating and/or hot-water heating source (using electric storage/panel heaters and/or immersion heaters in hot water tanks), RTS controls when relevant heaters charge up – typically over-night during off-peak (and often cheaper) usage periods. Most consumers that make use of cheaper off-peak tariffs are likely to have RTS equipment in their home/business. If you're unsure if you have RTS equipment in your home/business, contact your Electricity Supplier who will be able to confirm for you.

How does the RTS equipment in my home/business receive RTS updates?

RTS works by transmitting messages to RTS equipment in homes/businesses across all of the UK, using Longwave radio broadcast. It uses the same radio frequency that the BBC uses for delivering radio programmes such as Radio 4, the Extended Shipping Forecast, and Test Match Special.

Will RTS continue indefinitely?

No it won't. RTS was introduced in the late 1980's, and whilst Longwave radio transmission has remained reliable over the years, the infrastructure that supports it is now reaching the end of its natural operational life. The BBC have also recently announced that it plans move all of the content that is unique to Longwave onto other BBC broadcasting platforms such as Radio 4 FM/DAB, or on to other BBC Radio Stations such as Radio 5 Live Extra. So, it is clear that both Longwave radio broadcasting and RTS with it, is coming to an end.

I've got an RTS meter, but I've always been told never to let anyone change my meter, or it would stop working. Why is it different now?

Upgrading to a smart electricity meter is the natural technology upgrade for RTS. Smart electricity meters have been designed to include the necessary capability to replace RTS equipment. Your Electricity Supplier's smart meter installation engineer will ensure that your heating/hot water continues to operate as it does now.

What is being put in place to replace RTS?

The national smart meter infrastructure now in place for GB is the natural (and only) technology upgrade for RTS. Smart electricity meters can be directly programmed to deliver similar capability that the old RTS equipment was able to provide. Many Electricity Suppliers also offer a wider range of Time of Use products/tariffs that make use of smart electricity meter capability. It is expected that more innovative and flexible Time of Use tariffs will eventually replace the vast majority of the older legacy electricity tariffs that have been available in the past.

What happens to RTS when Longwave radio transmission ends?

Once a decision is made to end Longwave radio transmission, all other services that are broadcast on Longwave, including RTS will also end. The contract currently in place with the BBC for the provision of RTS ends on 31st March 2024. Whilst negotiations are underway to extend the RTS contract until 2025, preparations to close-down the RTS arrangements are already underway. Electricity Suppliers, Ofgem (the Energy Regulator), and Consumer Groups such as Citizens Advice, National Energy Action, the Energy Savings Trust and others are now urging consumers with RTS metering equipment to contact their Electricity Supplier to arrange for a smart electricity meter upgrade at the earliest opportunity in order to reduce the risk of disruption to their heating and/or hot water provision. If consumers leave it too late, there is a risk that their Electricity Supplier won't be able to offer a smart meter upgrade appointment before the Radio Teleswitching Service ends.

Can every RTS customer have a smart meter upgrade right now?

Unfortunately not. There are some situations where your Electricity Supplier won't be able to offer you an appointment for a smart meter upgrade just yet. If that's the case, then your Electricity Supplier will contact you once they're ready to carry out the upgrade.

Will the national smart metering infrastructure provide connectivity to every home/business?

The smart meter communications infrastructure provides coverage to around 99.25% of premises across the UK. However, there are a very small number of locations in the UK that can't yet be connected. If you're reliant on RTS and your home/business is in one of these locations, you might not be eligible for a smart meter upgrade just yet. Your Electricity Supplier will confirm whether or not your home/business can be connected, and if not, when it is likely to be.

If I rely on RTS, can I refuse to have a smart meter installed?

Yes, any consumer can refuse the offer of a smart meter upgrade from their Electricity Supplier. However, no other technology upgrade or replacement for RTS other than smart electricity meters will be available once RTS ends. Consumers are therefore encouraged to contact their Electricity Supplier to arrange for their RTS metering equipment to be upgraded to a new smart electricity meter at the earliest opportunity in order to reduce the risk of disruption to heating and/or hot water provision.

I still don't want a smart electricity meter. What will happen when RTS ends?

If you rely on RTS for heating and/or hot water provision, and you're still not prepared to accept a smart electricity meter upgrade as the replacement for RTS equipment, then there is a high probability that heating and hot water provision in your property will be affected – this is due to the

way in which RTS controls and switches the flow of electricity to charge storage/panel and immersion heaters during off-peak electricity usage periods. It could be the case that without receiving RTS messages, your heating could be left continuously on or off. If this happens, then it is highly likely that you will face increased electricity costs if your Electricity Supplier has to charge all of your electricity use at a single rate as a result of not being able to establish the split of electricity used between the more expensive peak and cheaper off-peak time periods.

I still don't want a smart electricity meter. What do I need to do when RTS ends?

If you refuse the offer of a smart electricity meter upgrade as the replacement for RTS, then you are likely to need to engage the services of an electrical contractor to make the necessary internal wiring changes in the home/business, and/or to fit a new heating controller to ensure the effective ongoing operation of heating and/or hot water equipment. The cost of making any changes needed to your internal wiring, or adding new heating/hot-water heating controls are the responsibility of the consumer/bill-payer or the property owner.

It is also highly likely that you will face increased electricity costs if your Electricity Supplier has to charge all of your electricity use at a single rate as a result of not being able to establish the split of electricity used between the more expensive peak and cheaper off-peak time periods.