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DP094

‘Supporting prepayment customers in no SM WAN scenarios’

Modification Report

Version 0.2



About this document

This document is a draft Modification Report. It currently sets out the background, issue, and progression timetable for this modification, along with any relevant discussions, views and conclusions. This document will be updated as this modification progresses.

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Contact

If you have any questions on this modification, please contact:

Joe Hehir

020 7770 6874

Joe.hehir@gemserv.com

1. Summary

This proposal has been raised by Andy Knowles from Utilita.

The Proposer has raised concerns that the minimum functional requirements set out in the second major version of the Smart Metering Equipment Technical Specifications (SMETS2) do not result in a device that is sufficiently robust to serve smart prepayment customers effectively. Similarly, the Adoption and Enrolment of SMETS1 meters in the Data Communications Company (DCC) leads to the same loss of resilience in relation to SMETS1 meters.

The Proposer seeks a solution to be able to effectively manage SMETS2 prepayment customers in no Wide Area Network (WAN), intermittent WAN or DCC outage scenarios equivalent to the commercially developed solution available from the Secure SMETS1 product.

2. Issue

Previous prepayment Modification Proposals

The Proposer predominantly supplies prepayment customers and has provided almost all of these customers with a SMETS1 meter. The Proposer has raised concerns that the minimum functional requirements set out in the SMETS2 do not result in a device that is sufficiently robust to serve smart prepayment customers effectively. Similarly, the Adoption and Enrolment of SMETS1 meters in the DCC leads to the same loss of resilience in relation to SMETS1 meters.

The Proposer has raised five Modification Proposals in an attempt to support the resolution of this issue, none of which have been able to find an achievable solution. Links to the original proposal forms are provided below, along with their associated submission date:

- [SECMP0028 'Prioritising Service Requests'](#) raised in December 2016;
- [SECMP0031 'Adding UTRN Functionality to SMETS'](#) raised in February 2017;
- [SECMP0032 'Prioritising Prepayment Customers in No WAN Situations'](#) raised in February 2017;
- [SECMP0037 'Pairing Local PPMIDs'](#) raised in June 2017; and
- [SECMP0038 'Sending Commands via PPMIDs'](#) raised in June 2017.

SECMP00031 sought to expand the capabilities of SMETS2 UTRNs to allow them to be used for the functions listed above, thus allowing full service of customers in no WAN scenarios. SECMP0032 sought to introduce a requirement on the DCC to prioritise pre-payment customers with no SM WAN. This would be done by reducing the Section F DCC obligation from 90 days to 30 days. SECMP00038 sought to allow for a means other than the SM WAN to deliver Service Requests. This too would allow Suppliers to fully service their customers where SM WAN coverage is poor or non-existent. SECMP00037 is supplementary to SECMP00038 and sought to make pairing of Pre-Payment Meter Interface Devices (PPMIDs) in no WAN scenarios easier.

The Proposer supplements the above Modification Proposals with this Draft Proposal in the hope of achieving a timely solution to the issues identified in these proposals. Modification SECMP0028 is not covered by this Draft Proposal as the DCC's [SECMP00067 'Service Request Traffic Management'](#) is intended to achieve its aims.

How does SM WAN affect customers?

The Smart Meter Wide Area Network (SM WAN) is the means by which Commands are sent to meters. The Proposer's SMETS1 experience suggests that around 9% of customers will experience very poor or no WAN connectivity. Utilita acknowledge that this is based on their SMETS1 experience and that SMETS2 SM WAN is an entirely separate and independent infrastructure. Whilst poor SM WAN affects all customers, it has the most significant impact on prepayment customers. Prepayment customers engage with their meter far more than credit customers do. Inaccurate data on the meter can cause prepayment customers inconvenience, put them in financial difficulty or in extremes be a safety concern. This is compounded because prepayment customers are more likely to be disabled or otherwise vulnerable¹.

¹ [Ofgem Customer Vulnerability Strategy: Prepayment meters](#)

Secure SMETS1 meter functionality in a no WAN situation includes a set of Commands which can be entered into the meter via 20, 40 and 60-digit Unique Transaction Reference Numbers (UTRNs), providing a resilient solution in most no/intermittent SM WAN scenarios.

However, as SMETS1 adoption and enrolment proceeds this functionality will no longer be available on these meters except for credit top-ups. Commands other than top-ups are also unavailable for SMETS2 meters. Such Commands account for approximately 1% of the Commands sent by the Proposer per year (if smart meters are rolled out to all 8 million² prepayment customers, then this would be result in an estimated 5 million Commands). The reduced functionality resulting from the loss of these Commands degrades the customer's experience. It will also give rise to higher Supplier costs in responding to customer issues that would have previously been resolved using these Commands.

No WAN – What are the minimum requirements?

The Proposer seeks a solution to be able to effectively manage SMETS2 prepayment customers in no WAN, intermittent WAN or DCC outage scenarios equivalent to the commercially developed solution available from the Secure SMETS1 product.

This, as a minimum, needs to include the ability to command the prepayment meter to action the following Commands:

- Deduct credit
- Set credit
- Change price
- Revert to default settings and remove data
- Open the Home Area Network (HAN)
- Change of mode
- Add debt
- Deduct debt
- Set debt
- Set friendly credit times/non-disconnect periods

The Proposer has noted the following use cases for requiring the functionality enabled by the above Commands:

Reacting to emergency incidents

Providing a key tool for the resolution of emergency incidents. For example, these Commands enable the Supplier to manage extreme weather or other significant events by changing non-disconnect periods. As an illustration, during an extreme weather event on 3 – 4 March 2018 (colloquially known as the 'Beast from the East'), Utilita alone sent 963,118 additional messages were sent to meters to

² [Ofgem report on vulnerable consumers in the energy market 2018 – Section 3.11, page 39.](#)

help to ensure that customers stay on supply. The extreme weather conditions meant that WAN connectivity was poorer than usual. Therefore, over 9% (86,000+ messages) would have been entered as a UTRN or else risk the customer being disconnected during freezing conditions.

Servicing customers in no-WAN scenarios

Enabling Suppliers to offer a full range of services to customers, even when they do not have a WAN connection. These services include discretionary credit for customers in payment difficulty and other such activities which prevent self-disconnection.

Changing top-up prices

Enabling Suppliers to ensure that top-up prices are in line with the prepayment price cap, which is updated by Ofgem every six months, in April and October. Without the ability to change prices in a no WAN situation, the customer may be paying more for their energy than they should be; and there is an additional cost for the supplier in reconciling how much money should have been paid and refunding the difference.

Adding debt to a meter

Such as when a customer requires a new device, such as a new In-Home Display (IHD). If the debt is not added promptly, a customer may face a one-off bill or commence paying for their device at a time when they face higher energy bills (e.g. during winter).

Joining new Devices to the HAN

Enabling a new IHD/PPMID to be joined to the HAN in the absence of WAN. In the absence of this functionality, customers will not be able to use their IHD/PPMID until WAN is resumed, which may disadvantage less physically able customers who use the PPMID to top-up.

Refunding customers

Enabling the Supplier to refund a customer if there is a change of tenancy and reset any debt and credit balances for the new customer. Without this, customers will face delays reclaiming their money, which could be critical for customers in financial difficulties.

Reducing the reliance on site visits

Reducing the number of site visits that Suppliers would otherwise be required to conduct. For example, the free top-ups described in the 'Beast from the East' example above would have required a site visit to over 10,000 customers. Site visits usually require the customer to be at their property, resulting in a potential loss of work or leisure time and an overall worse customer experience.

Reducing resolution timescales

In no WAN situations, the time taken to resolve issues relating to customer accounts is greatly reduced when UTRN functionality is available – i.e. customers do not have to wait for WAN to be re-established to update their meter.

What are the current arrangements?

DCC obligations in no WAN Incidents

The obligations set out in SEC Sections F ‘Smart Metering System Requirements’ (F7.18 through to F7.22) place timescales and resolution targets on the DCC for resolution of SM WAN coverage incidents during initial installs. The obligations are that the DCC must, within 90 days;

provide a response to the installing Supplier Party that either (i) confirms that the SM WAN is now available in the relevant area such that Communications Hubs installed at premises in that area can be expected to be able to connect to the SM WAN; or (ii) provides reasons why the SM WAN is not so available.

The obligation goes on to say the DCC must be able to confirm SM WAN availability in at least 99% of cases raised. In the absence of the additional Commands set out above, which provide additional functionality in no WAN situations, the timescales under these Sections of the SEC are highly problematic.

What is the issue?

The Proposer believes that the SEC Section F ‘Minimum Communication Services for SMETS1 Meters’ 90-day obligation in which the DCC shall resolve the lack of SM WAN in the given area is too long. This could leave a customer without full prepayment functionality for 90 days. Where the SM WAN issue was relating to a prepayment customer, the Proposer sought to shorten the 90-day obligation to 30 days – the details are set out in SECMP0032. However, the DCC advised this would incur an estimated cost of £1bn.

The Proposer also believes that there is neither clarity as to how the DCC is going to deliver against this obligation, nor what the scenario is where the DCC cannot resolve the SM WAN within 90 days. If the DCC is unable to remotely resolve the SM WAN coverage in an area, the next step may require an engineer to be sent to the site by the Supplier to resolve the problem. However, given that the market has a prepayment price cap in operation limiting Suppliers’ income, sending an engineer to site is not economically viable.

If a suitable solution can be implemented giving prepayment customers the functionality to manage their accounts during a period of no WAN, SECMP0031, SECMP0032, SECMP0037 and SECMP0038 will become redundant.

What is the impact this is having?

Impacts on prepayment customers

The Proposer believes that no WAN scenarios greatly diminish Suppliers’ ability to service prepayment customers, placing prepayment customers at a disadvantage compared to credit

customers. Furthermore, the customers impacted by this lack of functionality are more likely to be vulnerable, as noted above.

Impacts on the Proposer

The loss of functionality during no WAN incidents will significantly reduce the mechanisms available to call centre operatives to manage customer accounts. Given that intermittent SM WAN results in more customer contact with the Proposer and other Suppliers, this will result in longer calls, more complaints and, less customer engagement. Furthermore, the Proposer and other Suppliers will incur the additional cost of relying on engineer visits in situations that are currently resolved through a UTRN.

Feedback – Impacts on a Large Supplier

During the Development Stage a Large Supplier advised that it typically saw around 0.75% HAN/WAN connectivity issues in SMETS1. In these cases, it would carry out a site visit and exchange the meters to non-smart meter in order to secure supply to the customers.

It added that with SMETS2 credit installs it saw 3% HAN/WAN issues. However, it noted this is due to a known issue that has since been fixed in new Communications Hub firmware versions. Therefore, it would expect enduring issues to reduce back to at least as good as the 0.75% it experiences in SMETS1.

3. Assessment of the proposal

Observations on the issue

Views of the DCC

The DCC believe this proposal re-iterates the same issues that were raised under the previous modifications noted above, with the Proposer still in need of a solution.

The DCC note that more SMETS2 installs have taken place since the previous modifications were raised. This increase may provide more background information on what the problems now look like. The DCC's initial thoughts are that there isn't anything that suggests the situation has changed or worsened.

Views of a Large Supplier

Scale of the issue

Noting its experiences with SMETS1 and SMETS2 pilot installs, a Supplier Party advised that they do not support this proposal. They agreed that they do experience issues with HAN/WAN connectivity, with both prepayment and credit customers. However, these were in 0.75% of SMETS1 installations and 3% of SMETS2 installations.

Resolving HAN/WAN issues

The Supplier advised that where it does raise HAN/WAN issues, the DCC normally respond within 48 hours and in around two out of three cases, the Communications Services Provider (CSP) are able to resolve the issue remotely. In the other cases, it would schedule a site visit to re-boot the Communications Hub. If this failed it would replace the Communications Hub.

The Supplier added that the Section F 90-day DCC obligation is only supposed to be required in relatively extreme cases, which it is yet to experience despite installing 0.6m SMETS meters.

Prepayment commands

The Supplier advised that industry would need to develop a 'local command' delivery mechanism in order to support the full list of commands listed in Section 2 'Issue' within this proposal. Where WAN could not be established, this would allow the installer to leave the Communications Hub installed on site and commission the HAN. Then, once the WAN is established, a second site visit wouldn't be required to commission the HAN. However, there is currently no capability in place to support this. However, the Supplier acknowledged that customers having to enter a 20-digit UTRN to the PPMID isn't an ideal process to have to follow on a regular basis.

Views of Panel Sub-Committees

SMKI PMA views

The Smart Metering Key Infrastructure (SMKI) Policy Management Authority (PMA) noted that this proposal could have implications on SMKI, depending on how Commands will be signed, encrypted and decrypted.

A member questioned if one solution to the problem could cover the requirements for both SMETS1 and SMETS2. It advised the likely need for two different solutions due to the differing technical architecture and prepayment processes (for example, UTRN generation).

TABASC views

The Technical Architecture and Business Architecture Sub-Committee (TABASC) suggested that the issue be considered as affecting all meters and not just those in prepayment mode, noting that the problems are more acute for prepayment consumers.

Views of the Change Sub-Committee

The Change Sub-Committee (CSC) agreed there is an issue, and that smart prepayment does not always work in some scenarios. However, they noted the need to understand the scale of the issue, as the Proposer, being predominantly a prepayment Supplier, is likely to be more impacted than other Parties. They recognised the need for a cost-effective solution to the issue and suggested early engagement with the Technical Architecture and Business Architecture Sub-Committee (TABASC), should a technical solution be needed.

The CSC questioned the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's (BEIS's) initial policy intent on smart prepayment. They noted that the original technical specifications for the Smart Metering Implementation Programme (SMIP) never assumed there would ever be full WAN coverage. Therefore, they believed it should be clarified what Suppliers should be doing now in these no WAN scenarios. The CSC also noted that the previous modifications raised on this topic assumed a technical solution is needed and queried if there could be non-technical solutions to the issue. SECAS are still trying to obtain a response from BEIS regarding this matter.

The 'install and leave' scenario was noted as having significance to the issue set out in this Draft Proposal. This is where a site is listed as having WAN coverage, but the installation fails as the engineer cannot gain a connection with the WAN. Therefore, the engineer is unable to commission the HAN. A CSC Member advised that in this scenario, the DCC does not have to resolve the coverage, even if they advised that the site should have full WAN coverage, but it does not.

SECAS advised of its intent to issue a Request for Information (RFI) to SEC Parties to establish the impact of intermittent or no WAN. A member suggested there may be challenges with the RFI. It suggested broadening the scope of the modification and the RFI with a focus on WAN coverage, rather than on SMETS2 pre-payment where volumes are relatively low. SECAS suggested the RFI could be worded to cover issues with WAN as a whole and how it can impact the installation of Devices.

Appendix 1: Progression timetable

SECAS has issued a Request for Information to industry asking for their views on the impacts of the issue set out in this Draft Proposal.

Following this, SECAS will assess the feedback received and aim to provide an update to the CSC on 26 May 2020.

Timetable	
Action	Date
Draft Proposal raised	12 Nov 2019
Presented to CSC for initial comment	26 Nov 2019
Update given to the CSC	28 Jan 2020
SECAS issue Request for Information	3 Apr 2020 – 5 May 2020
Presented to CSC for final comment and recommendations	26 May 2020

Appendix 2: Glossary

This table lists all the acronyms used in this document and the full term they are an abbreviation for.

Glossary	
Acronym	Full term
CSP	Communications Services Provider
DCC	Data Communications Company
HAN	Home Area Network
IHD	In-Home Display
PPMID	Prepayment Meter Interface Device
SEC	Smart Energy Code
SMETS	Smart Metering Equipment Technical Specifications
SMIP	Smart Metering Implementation Programme
SM WAN	Smart Meter Wide Area Network
SMKI PMA	Smart Metering Key Infrastructure Policy Management Authority
TABACS	Technical Architecture and Business Architecture Sub-Committee
UTRN	Unique Transaction Reference Number
WAN	Wide Area Network