

Lives blighted by

PAMELA WELCH was terrified when she received a £1,200 energy bill from her supplier Ovo Energy. The 84-year-old, from Bracknell, Berkshire, was so worried about running up more costs that she started to go to bed at 7.30pm to avoid using any heating or appliances in the evening.

Pamela's nephew Steve Beach, who helps her with her bills, says that from the time she received that first frightening bill this March to July, Pamela's debts to Ovo escalated to more than £4,000, even though she used very

By **Helen Crane**

little gas and electricity. Initially Pamela didn't pay the bill that she couldn't afford, as she knew she didn't owe that sum. Although Steve tried to reason with Ovo on Pamela's behalf, she was nonetheless sent worrying debt collection letters.

'She's really beginning to panic — so much so that, as she keeps getting these letters, in the last couple of months she has sent two cheques for £500 in the hope that this will stop them,' says Steve.

When we contacted Ovo, it said that Pamela

had a dual-rate smart meter installed in May 2021, which allowed her to pay one tariff for her daytime use and a second, cheaper tariff for off-peak usage. But the meter had only been recording one rate, which resulted in the incorrect bills.

It apologised for not addressing the problem sooner, and said debt collection activity had been put on hold.

But as Pamela and Steve have taken Ovo to the ombudsman to dispute the charges, it says it will wait until that process was concluded to take further action.

Pamela is among hundreds of Ovo Energy customers who have written to Money Mail and our sister website *thisismoney.co.uk* in recent months about billing errors.

In many cases, customers are receiving bills that are hundreds, or even thousands, of pounds higher than they believe they should be.

They have also faced serious disruption to their lives. Some have been left with no heating or electricity, or have fallen behind with work due to hours spent on the phone to Ovo trying to resolve their billing problems.

Several tell of the toll it has taken on their mental health, and one customer told us his woes had left him contemplating suicide.

WHAT HAS GONE AWRY?

THE majority of readers who have contacted us were among the 3.5 million former customers of energy supplier SSE. They were transferred from SSE, formerly known as Southern Electric, when Ovo bought that supplier's retail arm in 2020 and catapulted itself from a small supplier into one of the big six UK energy firms overnight.

When customers were switched from SSE to Ovo, their bills were typically subject to an 'adjustment' — in other words, the difference between what SSE said they owed and what their new supplier Ovo believes is due.

These adjustments change the overall balance of the account and occur when Ovo Energy believes former SSE customers have underpaid or if it disputes their final balance with SSE.

However, on copies of Ovo bills we have seen, the reason for an adjustment is not explained. This can cause distress for customers, as they are not told why their bill has increased and so do not know whether it is likely to happen again. They also have little information with which to contest the bill if they think it is incorrect.

Barbara Nicholson, a vulnerable 86-year-old from Doncaster, South Yorkshire, received a £6,000 balance adjustment from Ovo.

Barbara's son, Gary, says: 'She received no correspondence about this to warn her of such a dramatic bill, nor any explanation.'

He says that his mother was more than £1,000 in credit when she switched from SSE. But she had a new meter fitted in June after she moved to Ovo, and was charged double that month, for the balance on both her old and new meter.

Gary says his mother's gas usage has been 'continually overestimated' since Ovo took over.

'My mother lives on her own. She does not cook but eats microwave meals. She only uses the washing machine about twice per week, and she goes to bed early, so all the lights and TV are switched off,' he says.

'She cannot climb the stairs, so does not use the upstairs level of her home and, as such, she cannot use the bath or shower. She just has a wash, so is using very little energy.

'And yet, her direct debit is far higher than my own and I live with my wife in a four-bedroom house.

'My mother is distraught — she

thinks her energy is going to be disconnected, as she cannot afford the outstanding debt of £5,000 that Ovo has suggested she owes.

'I suspect that many older people have been scared and just paid it, especially if they do not have any family around to realise it is wrong.'

When the Energy Ombudsman got involved, the £5,000 charge was removed from her bill — but this still left £1,000 of credit unaccounted for.

We contacted Ovo, which said the problem had been fixed and Barbara is now nearly £1,800 in credit.

I LOST MY SUPPLY THREE TIMES

SARAH ROBINSON, 38, a paediatric nurse, has been left with no heating, hot water, light or any means of cooking for days following Ovo Energy bumbles.

She switched from direct debit to a prepayment meter in January and received a final bill on her direct debit account for £952 — followed by another in June for £1,800.

She says her electricity supply has been cut off three times this year. The first time was after she tried to switch back to a direct debit tariff when she found the pre-payment charges more expensive.

'The member of staff said they would switch me over remotely, but my electricity was then cut off,' says Sarah. 'I called and they said they weren't able to switch me to monthly payments, and that I was unable to top up my pay-as-you-go for seven days due to the attempted switch.'

'I asked them what I should do, and they said there was nothing I could do.'

On two other occasions, she tried to top up her pay-as-you-go meter but there was a fault with Ovo's system, leaving her unable to top up either via the app or by phone. The second time an engineer needed to come to her property to reconnect the supply, which she says took five days.

She adds: 'I am a nurse with little money, and these problems with Ovo have been worrying me to the point of sleep deprivation and my mental health has been suffering.'

'I have spent hours on the phone being transferred from one department to another, speaking to unhelpful and rude members of the Ovo team.'

'I was left with no heating, hot water, light or any means of cooking. I have had to move out of my flat on three separate occasions.'

'I have spent hundreds of pounds on accommodation and replacing spoilt fridge and freezer items. Nobody at Ovo seemed to care. In fact, I even had one lady laugh at me down the phone.'

When we got in touch with Ovo about Sarah's case, it reviewed the usage on her smart meter and amended her bill. Her outstanding balance fell to £882.71 after a goodwill payment was also applied.

I'VE GOT ANOTHER PERSON'S DEBT

JANE SMITH, 72, had her account switched from SSE to Ovo earlier this year. But since then, she has received bills registered to a stranger with a different name and account number.

Jane, whose name we have changed at her request, claims that Ovo refused to speak to her or change the name on the account as it claimed she didn't have an Ovo account in her own name. 'Ovo has made my life a misery for seven months,' she says. 'I haven't slept or eaten properly and have lost contact with friends.'

'Ovo threatens me with debt collectors for money I don't owe. I've

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OVO bill blunders

Sarah's had to move out three times because firm keeps on cutting power

Pamela goes to bed at 7.30pm to stop £4,000 bill going up

Nicola's fallen behind at work since bodged SSE switch...

never even had a parking ticket, far less not paid a bill I owe.'

When she did finally get an account in her own name, Jane believes the debt on the other person's account was transferred over to hers — and she was told she would be referred to a debt collection agency. She took her case to the ombudsman at around the same time that we contacted Ovo on her behalf.

Ovo eventually admitted its mistake, closed the account that wasn't hers and paid £250 as a goodwill gesture in late September. But that £250 came off the bill that Jane doesn't think she owes,

so she argues that this is not proper compensation.

Jane thinks her bill was higher than it should have been, but has decided to pay it off so she could switch her supplier.

'I have come to the point where I'm going to have to pay somebody else's bill for way more money than I can afford,' she says. 'I will have

to borrow it and pay it back just so as I can get away from them.' Ovo said it had implemented all remedies required by the ombudsman.

I TOOK OVO TO COURT...

NICOLA RATNETT, from Mid Wales, was switched over to Ovo in

May 2022. But the freelance writer, 61, says her work has been disrupted for months by ongoing problems with her billing.

Nicola says she only used around 1,800 kilowatts per year with SSE, as she uses wood burners and logs for most of her heat — but she has been billed for 2,500 kilowatts in a single month by Ovo.

In protest at what she says are incorrect charges, Nicola has not paid Ovo for any of her usage.

She has offered to pay just the standing charge, as this is the only element of her bill that she is confident is being calculated correctly, but was told she could

not do this. Nicola is also in a dispute with Ovo over payments that she should get for generating energy from solar panels.

Ovo says she must have a smart meter to receive the payments, but Nicola does not want one, chiefly because she lives in a rural area with poor internet and phone signal, so worries that it won't work properly. This means she is unable to export her excess power.

SSE allowed customers to export energy if they had either a smart meter or a non-smart meter that was capable of taking half-hourly readings, but Ovo's rule is that only a smart meter is acceptable.

'I've lived a very fortunate life, I've never been in debt and I've never owed money, so this has all been quite a shock,' says Nicola.

'I haven't paid Ovo anything. I've told it over and over again, "You send me something that looks like a proper bill and I will pay it". This shouldn't affect my working life, but it does.'

She did a subject access request with the Information Commissioner's Office to find out what information Ovo held on her. She discovered that Ovo had added a note on her account which said: 'Do not open complaints regarding meter or usage'.

Nicola decided to open a case in the small claims court in the hope of getting reimbursement for the time and money she had spent trying to resolve the situation. She is self-employed and says her battles with the firm have led to her falling behind with her work.

'It was for the costs, the telephone calls, postage, copying and my time. I charged £3 per day for every day that the complaint has been running,' she says.

In July this year, her case reached the top of the list and was heard by the court. Because Ovo did not reply within the stated timeframe, the judge decided that Nicola had won by default and Ovo was forced to pay her £2,877.20 including costs.

However, she is still locked in a dispute with the firm about her solar panel payments. Ovo says it has informed Nicola on multiple occasions that she needed a smart meter if she wanted to receive them, and she had refused to get one. It said this was standard practice across the industry and was also stated on its website. Nicola has now taken her case to the Energy Ombudsman.

A spokesman for Ovo says: 'Our teams have been working to put right each of the customer cases that have been raised with us.'

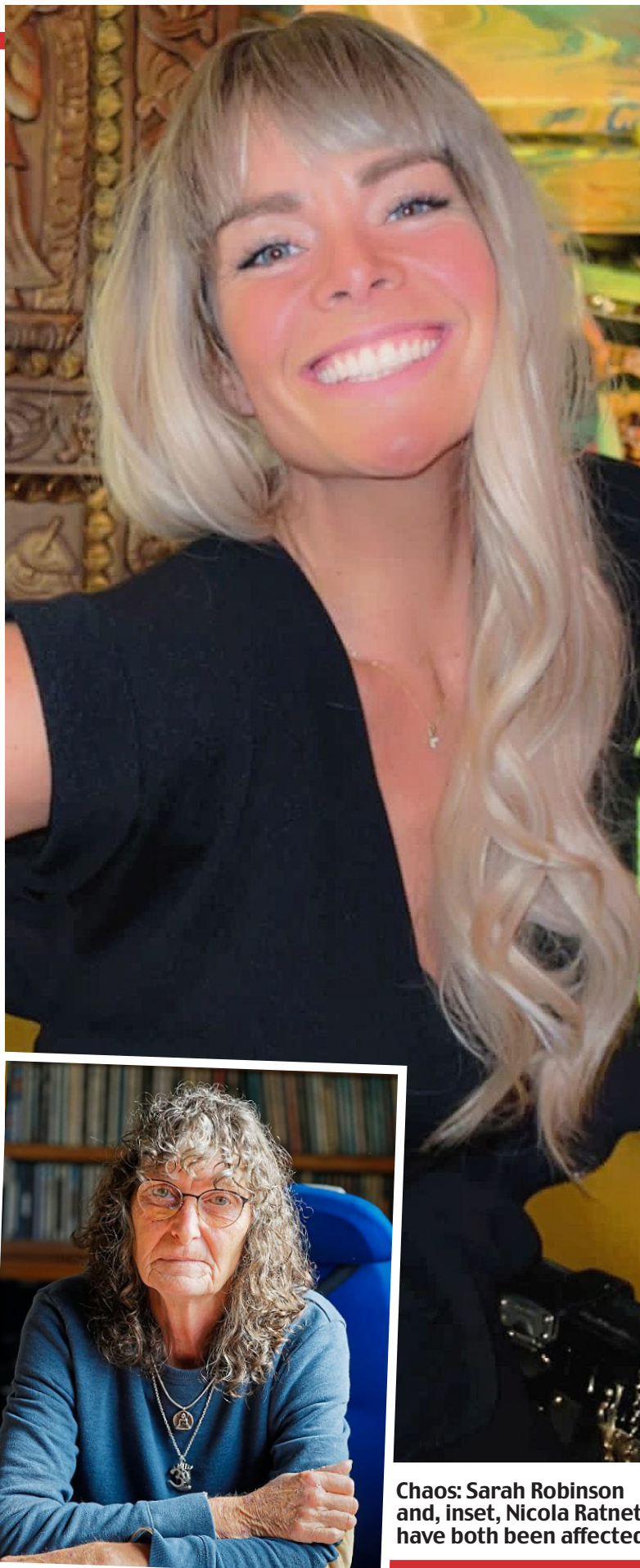
'We're sincerely sorry to those customers who haven't received the support and service they should rightly expect.'

'We are dedicating more advisers [to this] to ensure our customers receive the support they need.'

Ovo has already paid compensation to some customers after billing problems. In May, regulator Ofgem forced Ovo to correct 11,000 customers' bills, and pay them an average of £181 each in compensation, as they were overcharged between October 2022 and March 2023.

However, the cases we received suggest that hundreds of customers have continued to be wrongly billed beyond that date.

Earlier this year, Ofgem launched an investigation into Ovo to check it was complying with its standard licence conditions around 'treating domestic customers fairly, obligations to customers on the Priority Services Register and ensuring customers' prepayment meters are safe and reasonably practicable in all circumstances'.



Chaos: Sarah Robinson and, inset, Nicola Ratnett have both been affected

HAS YOUR BILL GONE WRONG?

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