

Stephen Littlechild

Professor Stephen Littlechild, former Director General of Electricity Supply and part of the Energy Policy Research Group at the University of Cambridge, writes about his proposed Overall Customer Satisfaction League, a new way to evaluate suppliers' customer service. He also considers how suppliers' ratings have changed over the past few months.

Energy customers certainly care about price, but they also care about quality and reliability of service. Plenty of price comparison websites help customers find the best price. How to find the suppliers offering the best customer service?

No one measure can fully capture all aspects of customer satisfaction. I have proposed the calculation of an Overall Customer Satisfaction (OCS) score for GB energy suppliers. Robert Buckley, Head of Relationship Development at Cornwall Insight kindly summarised it in a previous Nutwood ([ES736](#)). The OCS score is an average of four independent ratings provided by Ofgem, the Consumers' Association, Citizens Advice and customers on Trustpilot. So, it is a measure of all-round performance rather than of any specific aspect.

A quick recap of the period May 2018 to August 2020 will set the scene for this update. Some suppliers – like PFP, Green Star and iSupply - did not stay the course. New suppliers entered, like Avro, So and Outfoxthemarket. Other suppliers, like Engie and Solarplicity, were in the league only temporarily. But many suppliers were there throughout this period. Some, like Bulb and npower, stayed in the same divisions throughout (Divisions 1 and 4 respectively). Others, like E.ON and OVO Energy, were promoted or relegated.

The last five months

During the last five months, from late August 2020 to early January 2021, Citizens Advice has put out two further quarterly ratings, and Ofgem has published another quarter's complaints data. Figure 1 shows how has this changed suppliers' positions in the OCS league.

For context, from 22 July 2019 to 27 August 2020, Ofgem, Which? and TrustScores showed a slight increase on average, Citizens Advice a slight decrease. From 27 August 2020 to 5 January 2021, Citizens Advice showed a slight increase and TrustScore a slight decrease, the other two ratings having no definite trend.

In Division 1, Octopus Energy and So Energy held their positions at the top of the league, scoring around 85%. Avro too held on after a tremendous improvement (across the board) over the previous year.

Co-operative Energy continued its remarkable rise, again across the board, but increasingly helped by taking the superior Octopus Energy complaint ratings and adopting a more proactive policy of inviting customer reviews on Trustpilot. Co-operative and Outfoxthemarket, which had an improved Citizens Advice rating, now score around 80%.

In Division 2, PurePlanet slipped a little in Ofgem complaints and Citizens Advice ratings, but stays top of a tightly contested Division 2. Along with it are improving Utility Warehouse and E, the strongest performing prepayment supplier. Utility Point slips slightly but maintains its position. Joining them in the 70-75% band are Bulb, relegated from Division 1 for the first time in league history, and Green Network Energy, both suffering from significant and continuing falls in Ofgem complaints ratings.

In Division 3 are a small group of four suppliers in the 65-67% range. British Gas and SSE both increased their scores considerably over the year to August 2020, by improving their Ofgem complaints ratings and slightly improving their Which? ratings; SSE fell back on Citizens Advice but significantly improved its TrustScore. However, in the subsequent period both fell back on Ofgem complaints and Citizens Advice ratings. SSE further improved its TrustScore, but that was not sufficient. Along with them is Utilita, up following an increase in its Citizens Advice score. Finally, there is OVO Energy, continuing its long-standing decline (whose beginning predates July 2019), in this case primarily a fall in the Ofgem complaints rating over the year to August 2020.

Given the clustering and spread of supplier scores, let us use five Divisions today. In Division 4 are E.ON and Scottish Power, both of which scored extremely low in July 2019 but had tremendous increases in OCS scores during the previous year as a result of significantly better Ofgem complaints ratings and TrustScores. But their complaints ratings fell back over the last few months, as did E.ON's Citizens Advice rating. They ended up with three other suppliers at around 60% OCS score. Initially Shell Energy improved a little on Ofgem complaints, but otherwise tended to drift down across the board. Ecotricity fell initially on Ofgem

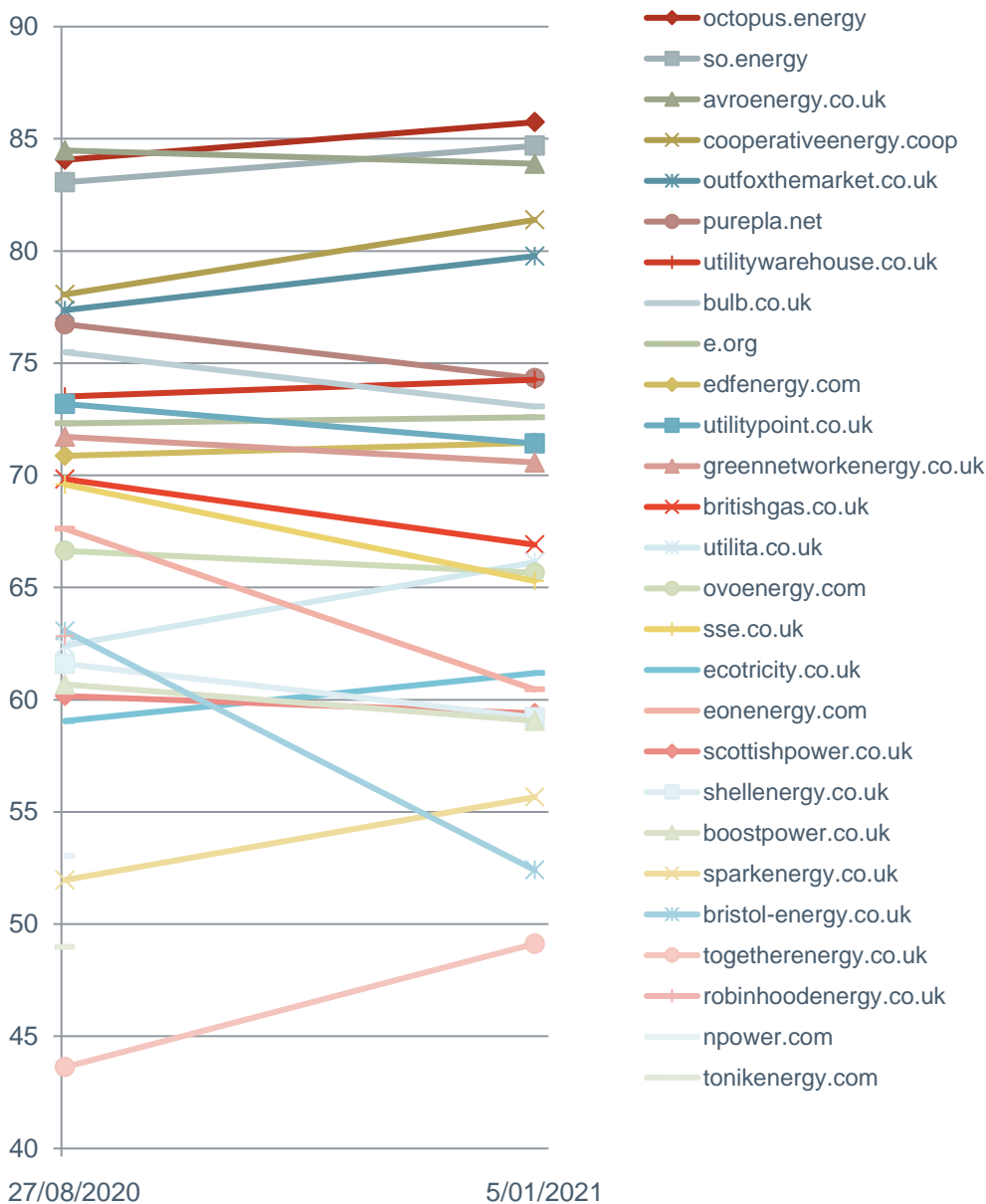
complaints and Citizens Advice ratings but picked up a little on TrustScore at the end. And OVO Energy's PPM supplier Boost Power entered the ranks.

Finally, in Division 5, OVO Energy's other PPM supplier Spark Energy rose slightly from 52% to 56%. The former municipal suppliers have fared very badly, Bristol having been at 68% in July 2019 and down to 52% by January 2021, and Robin Hood Energy having been at 69% in July 2019, was down to 63% in August 2020 and is no longer rated by Citizens Advice. Together Energy took on the Bristol Energy companies, but itself has struggled: from 49% in July 2019 down to 44% in August 2020, by far the lowest score in the OCS league, with low Ofgem complaints scores and a fall in the Which? ratings. An increase in the latest Citizens Advice rating has lifted it to 49% but it is still by some measure the lowest rated supplier in the OCS league.

Finally, two other suppliers left the OCS league during the last few months. npower improved somewhat over the first year, but once it was acquired by E.ON it was no longer rated by Citizens Advice, hence is no longer eligible for the OCS league. Tonik Energy plummeted dramatically from 72% in July 2019 to 49% in August 2020 as its various ratings fell and in particular its Ofgem complaints score (as calculated for this index) fell to practically zero. It had left the market by January 2021.

Competition on customer service, as on price, shows no sign of diminishing. Looking forward, a new set of ratings is soon due from Which?, and next month some updated Ofgem complaints scores, along with constantly evolving TrustScores. Can all these suppliers maintain their pace, or will some flag and others take their place?

Figure 1: Overall Customer Satisfaction League Changes 27 Aug 2020 - 5 Jan 2021



Source: Professor Stephen Littlechild, adapted from data from Ofgem, Which?, Citizens Advice and customers on Trustpilot