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Even energy boss admits smart meters aren't that smart! EDF chief says £11bn plan to introduce them nationally will face 'many challenges'

Vincent de Rivaz has said that the £11billion scheme faces 'many challenges' - The smart meters project is expected to be rolled out to 26 million homes - But problems with the communication infrastructure mean modern models may not be issued

Problems with the communication infrastructure meant that many customers will not get the best 'next generation' meters (file image)

The boss of one of Britain's biggest electricity firms has questioned the 'security and safety' of the national £11billion roll-out of smart meters across the UK.

Vincent de Rivaz, chief executive of EDF Energy, said the program faces 'many challenges' and was critical of the quality of the meters being offered to customers. He added that the issues may pose a threat to 'public confidence' in the program.

The smart meter project is intended to fit 26 million homes across the country with smart meters by 2020.

But problems with the communication infrastructure meant that many customers will not get the best 'next generation' meters. Instead they will get inferior meters that cost more and make it harder to switch suppliers, the boss of EDF said.

Around 2million inferior 'first generation' smart meters – codenamed SMETS 1 - have already been installed. Some users have complained that when they try to switch to different suppliers, the smart meters no longer work.

Vincent de Rivaz, chief executive of EDF Energy, said the programme faces 'many challenges'

In effect, after switching supplier the meter reverts to being a conventional meter.

Eventually, improvements to the infrastructure for the project will allow more sophisticated 'next generation' meters, known as SMETS 2 to be used. But as yet, the network, run by the Data Communications Company, a subsidiary of Capita, has not yet been upgraded.

GCHQ, the government's codebreaking body, have been drafted in to improve security to the network, which it warned was vulnerable to being hacked.

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The Royal Academy of Engineering warned in a report that 'disruption on a massive scale is possible' if hackers managed to switch off householders' electricity remotely.

In a speech yesterday, Mr de Rivaz said:

"Delays to the communications infrastructure — the DCC - now means millions more customers will get less digitally sophisticated meters than intended. These meters make things more complex from the moment when a customer switches supplier — and they cost more than the next-generation meters. It is our responsibility to maintain public confidence in the program and keep costs under control. That's why I think now is time for all the parties — Government, suppliers, regulator, DCC, providers of technology — to sit together and take stock on where we are. We need to be honest with ourselves on all the issues: security, safety, quality, costs and timeline."

Mr de Rivaz said that the industry

"has a shared responsibility in the success or the failure of this program."

He added:

"We are all committed to making it a success because we understand the long term potential. But we are also aware of the many challenges faced."

The cost of installing the smart meters is an average of £400 per property, which is added to energy bills over time.

The program was first devised under the last Labour government but received support from the subsequent Tory and Lib Dem coalition.

Smart meters have been promoted on the basis they give real time information on how much energy is being used to the homeowner and their energy company – getting rid of estimated bills.

Radio antennae in the meters transmit the information to the energy companies.

It is hoped the meters will reduce energy use as customers will be able to see how much they energy they are using.

The benefit to electricity company is that they will no longer need to employ meter readers.

An EDF spokesman said that 'taking stock' of the program did not mean pausing or scrapping the scheme.