

## **UTILITIES – GAS / ELECTRIC /WATER**

### **GAS**

#### **How to obtain a gas supply**

When you move to a new home, tell the gas supplier the date you want to take over the supply. If it has to be reconnected, the supplier may make a charge, Energywatch can advise on whether a charge should be made and what a reasonable amount is. If the supply has not been disconnected, read the meter and inform the supplier of the reading. Keep a copy of the reading. If you want to change your gas supplier, notify both the current and the new gas suppliers. Both will want a final meter reading taken on the day you change suppliers. Some suppliers will send a meter reader; others will ask you to read the meter and send the reading to them. In either case, keep a note of the meter reading in case there is a dispute later.

For information and advice about changing to a new supplier, contact Energywatch on 0845 906 0708 or at [www.energywatch.org.uk](http://www.energywatch.org.uk). Energywatch can provide advice on what to check if you want to change suppliers and a list of local gas suppliers. You can also get price comparison fact sheets. If a supplier agrees to supply, it must normally:-

- supply gas as soon as reasonably practical; and
- continue to supply gas for as long as you want it.

If you have problems getting a gas supply, or it is going to be stopped, consult an experienced adviser, for example, a Citizens Advice Bureau. To search for details of your nearest CAB, including those that can give advice by email, click on nearest CAB.

#### **Providing financial security**

In some circumstances the gas supplier will refuse to connect the gas supply until you have provided suitable financial security. You may be asked to:-

- join a regular payment plan or
- agree to have a prepayment meter or
- provide a guarantor or
- make a cash deposit.

The gas supplier will normally only require security in certain circumstances, for example, if you are a new customer and cannot provide proof of your identity or previous address or have a poor payment record at your present or last address.

#### **Meters**

A gas supplier must provide an appropriate meter to a customer who asks for one. There are two main types of meter:-

- credit or quarterly meters, where you use the gas and pay for it later
- prepayment meters, where you pay in advance for your gas supply.

##### **Credit meters**

Most customers will have a credit meter, which records gas consumption. A bill is sent out quarterly and calls to read the meter are made every six months. Estimated bills are sent in alternate quarters. You can pay the bill in a number of ways (see under heading Gas bills).

##### **Prepayment meters**

In most areas, coin less prepayment ('smartcard') meters have replaced token, key and coin meters and are the only option for a new installation. If you already have a token, key or coin meter, you can continue to use it until the meter breaks down and cannot be repaired or until you choose a different type of meter. The gas supplier will give you a list of the places you can get the card, token or key charged, which may include vending machines. The meter will record the amount of gas used.

#### What type of meter will be supplied?

The gas supplier will normally supply a credit meter. If you have difficulty paying for your gas and have not been able to negotiate paying by instalments or similar arrangements, you can ask for a prepayment meter.

If you are over pension age or disabled, you can have a prepayment meter if you want, as long as it is the best way to pay and it is safe and practical to do so. For example, it may not be safe and practical if the meter can easily be broken into or cannot be installed in an accessible place.

#### Meter readings

Gas meters are usually read every six months. If the gas supplier has been unable to gain access to read the meter it will leave a card for you to fill in with your own reading. If you are disabled, chronically sick or of pensionable age, you can ask the gas supplier to read your meter every three months. The gas supplier must inspect and test the meter at least once every two years.

### **ELECTRICITY**

#### **How to get an electricity supply**

When you move to a new home, you should tell the new electricity supplier the date on which you wish to take over the supply. The electricity supplier may be your current electricity supplier, or you may wish to change to a different supplier when you move. You may have to change if your current electricity supplier does not supply electricity in the area to which you have moved.

The amount of notice you have to give your current electricity supplier to cancel the contract and whether you have to pay a cancellation fee depends on the type of contract you have and the circumstances. Your current electricity supplier can object to you changing to another electricity supplier in certain circumstances, for example, if you are in arrears. If you are moving home, the electricity supplier cannot object.

You should cancel any standing orders or direct debits once you have paid the final bill to your current electricity supplier.

Your current and new electricity suppliers will want a final meter reading taken on the day you change electricity suppliers. Some electricity suppliers will send a meter reader and may make a charge for this, while others will ask you to read the meter and send the reading to them. The new electricity supplier is responsible for sending the reading to the previous electricity supplier. In either case, you should keep a note of the meter reading yourself in case there is a dispute later.

You must give your new electricity supplier the supply number for the meter at your home. The supply number is an identification number for the meter and is shown on the bill relating to the meter. If you are moving home, you will have to ask the present occupiers for the supply number.

If the supply of electricity has to be reconnected, the electricity supplier may make a charge for reconnection. If you think the reconnection charge is unreasonable, you can refer the matter to Energywatch who can decide whether a charge should be made and, if so, how much.

#### **Getting advice about changing to a new electricity supplier**

For information and advice about changing to a new electricity supplier, contact Energywatch on 0845 906 0708 or at [www.energywatch.org.uk](http://www.energywatch.org.uk). Energywatch can provide advice on what to check if you want to change suppliers and a list of local electricity suppliers. You can also get price comparison fact sheets.

## Meters

There are various different meters which fall into two main types:-

1. Credit (also known as a quarterly meter), where the customer uses the electricity and pays for it later.
2. Prepayment meters, where the customer pays in advance for her/his electricity supply

### Credit meters

Most customers will have a credit meter and will receive bills four times a year. This is known as quarterly billing. The electricity supplier will call to read the meter at regular intervals or contact the customer and ask them to read the meter and pass on the reading. The meter must be read at least once a year, but this can be read by the customer rather than the electricity supplier. The customer can pay the bill in a number of ways. The advantages of paying electricity by credit meter include:-

- a continuous supply of electricity
- the meter is not likely to be broken into as it contains no money
- the charges are normally lower than for a prepayment meter (see below)
- a variety of payment methods.

The disadvantages of paying electricity by credit meter include:-

- it is easier to fall into arrears
- the meter has to be read and inaccurate estimated readings may be relied on. However, the customer has the opportunity to return an estimated bill and provide an actual meter reading if they believe the estimate is too high/low.

### Prepayment meters

In most areas, cashless prepayment meters have replaced coin meters and are the only option for a new installation.

### Cashless meters

Cashless meters use an electronically-coded, token or key which carries the customer's reference number and the meter's serial number and cannot be used to buy electricity for anyone else. The electricity supplier will give you a list of the places you can get the card, token or key charged, which may include vending machines.

The card, token or key will have an emergency credit facility, so that if you use all the credit you have paid for, you will be allowed to continue to use electricity for a short while.

The advantages of paying by a cashless meter include:-

- you can pay for the fuel you use in advance, and will be less likely to fall into arrears
- it is unlikely to be broken into as it contains no money
- it is usually installed free of charge
- a cashless meter will automatically reset the tariff if there is an increase in the cost of electricity, so that you will not be building up arrears until the meter is reset
- the meter can be reset to pay off arrears as an alternative to disconnection
- a security deposit or guarantor will not normally be required.

The disadvantages of paying by a cashless meter include:-

- you will be without electricity if you cannot afford to charge your card, token or key, although it will normally have an emergency credit facility on it to give you a day or two more
- you may have to pay transport costs to get to the nearest outlet to charge the card, token or key and, if you cannot afford to put much money onto the card, token or key at any one time, you may have to make frequent journeys

- it may be difficult for you to get to the nearest outlet to charge the card, token or key, for example, if you live in a rural area, are disabled, or have young children
- you cannot spread the cost of the larger winter bills over the whole year
- if the meter is reset to recover arrears, you will pay more towards the arrears when you are using more fuel which will contribute to your financial difficulties
- the cost of electricity is generally higher than with a credit meter
- the meter location might make it difficult to use. You may be able to have the meter re-sited free of charge.

### Coin meters

Coin meters are no longer being installed, as they are not being made and are increasingly difficult to maintain as some spare parts are unavailable. If you already have a coin meter you can continue to use it until the meter breaks down and cannot be repaired or until you choose a different type of meter.

### Meter readings

When the electricity supplier comes to read the meter you should, if possible, read the meter yourself to confirm the accuracy of the reading.

You must allow access to the meter whenever this is needed by the electricity supplier. If the electricity supplier has been unable to gain access to read the meter they may leave a card for you to fill in with your own reading, or contact you to ask you for the meter reading.

### Electricity bills

Electricity bills will be sent to you at regular intervals. The bill should include the following information:-

- your name and address
- your supply number
- the date the meter was read
- the present meter reading (which may be an estimate or the customer's own reading)
- the previous meter reading (which may be an estimate or the customer's own reading)
- the unit charge at which the electricity is supplied and the total charge for the amount of electricity consumed
- a daily standing charge, if one is made
- any payments made since the last bill was sent
- any outstanding arrears
- whether the charge is for a credit or prepayment meter
- a statement which says you have a right to refer a complaint to Energywatch and gives contact details for Energywatch.

The standing charge is a fixed daily amount charged to electricity users, regardless of how much electricity is consumed. There are different charges for credit and prepayment meters.

### Paying the electricity bill

Electricity suppliers must provide a variety of ways for you to pay your bill if you have a credit meter. The minimum requirement is that an electricity supplier must allow you to pay by cash, cheque, postal order or monthly direct debit. Your electricity supplier may also offer other payment methods. Some electricity suppliers will give a discount if you pay by a particular method. The electricity supplier will normally allow the bill to be paid:-

- by posting a cheque, postal order, credit or debit card details to the electricity supplier
- at any post office, in cash, saving stamps or by cheque
- at your bank. A charge may be made if the bill is paid in cash
- at another bank. A charge may be made, although some electricity suppliers have set up free payment schemes
- in cash at PayPoints, which are situated in local outlets such as supermarkets, service stations and shops.

If you cannot afford to pay the electricity bill in full when it arrives you may wish to consider using one of the payment methods listed below to spread the cost and help you avoid arrears:

- Having a prepayment meter installed
- Buying electricity saving stamps regularly to pay some or your entire bill when it arrives. Electricity savings stamps can only be bought from post offices and can be used to pay electricity bills. Not all electricity suppliers operate a stamp scheme
- Getting advice on how to reduce your electricity consumption
- Regular payment plans
  - You should ask your electricity supplier for information about the payment schemes, which are available. Some electricity suppliers offer a discount to customers who pay their bills by direct debit, standing order or by a flexible payment or budget scheme. You should check carefully the terms of the payment schemes your electricity supplier offers.

The most common regular payment plans are:-

- Direct debit or standing order
- Budget schemes with regular fixed payments
- Flexible payments scheme

### **Useful organisations**

#### **Energywatch**

Energywatch (the gas and electricity consumer council) is an independent organisation which represents and protects the interests of gas consumers. It can help with complaints about both the supply of gas and gas appliances.

Tel: 08459 060708

Minicom: 08457 581401

Fax: 020 7799 8341

Email: [enquiries@energywatch.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@energywatch.org.uk)

Website: [www.energywatch.org.uk](http://www.energywatch.org.uk)

#### **Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem)**

Ofgem is an independent regulatory body, set up by the government to monitor and regulate the activities of gas suppliers. It has the power to make a gas supplier supply gas to a particular customer, or not to disconnect a gas supply. Ofgem also monitors gas suppliers' Codes of Practice and seeks to ensure that people with gas arrears are dealt with fairly, reasonably and sensitively.

Consumer complaints are dealt with by Energywatch.

Tel: 08459 060708

Fax: 020 7799 8341

Minicom: 08457 581401

Email: [enquiries@energywatch.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@energywatch.co.uk)

Website: [www.energywatch.org.uk](http://www.energywatch.org.uk)

## **Council for Registered Gas Installers (CORGI)**

CORGI is an independent organisation which promotes gas safety. Anyone who installs or services gas equipment must register with CORGI. CORGI ensures that the Gas Safety Regulations and the British Standard Codes of Practice are met, although it does not prosecute firms itself but refers the case to the Health and Safety Executive.

If you wish to complain about a gas installer, or want details of CORGI registered gas installers, contact CORGI at:-

1 Elmwood  
Chineham Park  
Crockford Lane  
Basingstoke  
Hampshire  
RG24 8WG  
Reception: 0870 401 2200  
Customer services: 0870 401 2300  
Email: [enquiries@corgi-gas.com](mailto:enquiries@corgi-gas.com)  
Website: [www.corgi-gas-safety.com](http://www.corgi-gas-safety.com)

## **WATER**

### **Getting a water supply**

Water is supplied by a number of private water companies. As a domestic customer living in a property you have the right to a water supply. There is no charge for taking over a water supply, which is already connected. If a water supply is to be connected to a property, the company is entitled to make charges. These charges will be set out in the company's charges scheme. If you wish to obtain details of your company's charges scheme you should contact your company.

### **Calculating water charges**

There are several different methods of calculating charges for water. A water company may use one or more of these.

The charging methods are:-

- an unmeasured charge based on the rateable value of the property. The water supply charge is calculated as an amount in pence per pound of the rateable value. This amount varies between companies; or
- an unmeasured charge based on a flat rate charge. Some water companies charge a flat rate to all people without a water meter, irrespective of the amount of water used or the type of property they live in; or
- an unmeasured charge based on banding. Some companies operate a banding system. The company assesses the water charges, based on, for example, the size and type of the property or the number of occupants; or
- a measured charge (using a water meter) based on the amount of water, usually per cubic metre, used at a rate approved by the Director General of the Office of Water Services (OFWAT).

You may be able to choose which method is used. The choice will usually be between a water meter and another charging method.

From 1 April 2000, people who are already receiving their water supply on an unmeasured basis for normal household use can continue to pay for their water in this way rather than having to switch to a measured charge by a water meter.

You may want to request that a meter is installed if:-

- you use very little water
- the property has a high rateable value
- you want more control of how much water you pay for.

However, possible disadvantages of a water meter include:-

- the inconvenience of having it read
- water lost through leakage after the meter is installed must be paid for. However, all companies operate a code of practice on leaks for people with water meters, which may provide some protection
- the uncertainty of how much the annual bill will be.

All household customers can elect to have a water meter installed in their homes free of charge, unless it is not practical or would be unreasonably expensive to install a water meter. You may wish to do this to find out whether this will help to reduce your bills. You will normally be able to switch back to your old charging method, as long as you do so within 12 months of the start of metered charging.

### Water bills

Your water bill may include the following:-

- a standing charge
- a charge for water, based on a meter reading or another charging method
- a charge for sewerage. If your sewerage service is provided by a different company, you may receive a separate sewerage bill.

Bills are usually sent once or twice a year, depending on the company's practice. If the water charge is on an unmeasured basis, the bill will be for the forthcoming billing period. If the water charge is a measured charge the bill will be for the preceding billing period.

### Help with water bills

Some people may be able to get help with the costs of their water supply, for example, people with water meters who use a high volume of water because of certain medical conditions, or because they have 3 or more children under 16, and are receiving a qualifying benefit. They may benefit from a bill calculated as an average charge for domestic customers of that company rather than on their actual measured use of water.

All companies have provisions in place to help people who have difficulty paying their bills, for example, budget schemes.

### Who is liable to pay the bill?

The occupier of the property is normally responsible for paying water charges. If someone shares accommodation, the liability is shared even if the bill is only in one name. An occupier who remains in a property after the person with whom they shared has left (for example, if partners have separated) may be held responsible for current charges and any arrears. The company may also seek to recover money owed by the person who has left the accommodation.

### Water arrears

Water companies cannot disconnect a domestic customer for water arrears. The company would have to take action in the county court for debt.

### Arrangements to pay the arrears

You will have to pay for your current use of water as well as a reasonable amount towards the arrears. If you are receiving income support, income-based jobseekers allowance or Pension Credit, you may be able to use the 'water direct' scheme. The Department for Work and Pensions will pay an amount each week from your benefit directly to the water company.

## **Useful organisations**

### **Office of Water Services (OFWAT)**

The Office of Water Services (OFWAT) is the independent regulatory body set up by the government to monitor and regulate the activities of the water companies.

If you have a problem with your water company, you should initially take up the complaint with the company. If you are not satisfied, you can take up the complaint with the Customer Services Committee (CSC) (see below). If the company does not accept the CSC's recommendation for resolving a complaint, the matter will be referred to OFWAT. The address of OFWAT is:-

### **OFWAT**

Centre City Tower

7 Hill Street

Birmingham B5 4UA

Tel: 0121 625 1300

Textphone: 0121 625 1422.

Email: [enquiries@ofwat.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofwat.gsi.gov.uk)

Website: [www.ofwat.gov.uk](http://www.ofwat.gov.uk)

### **Customer Services Committees (CSCs)**

The Customer Services Committees (CSCs) are independent of the water companies and can investigate and take up complaints. The CSCs are appointed by the Director General of OFWAT.

The address of the regional CSC can be obtained from the water company or OFWAT.

### **Drinking Water Inspectorate**

The Drinking Water Inspectorate monitors the quality of water. If you are unhappy about the quality of your water, you can complain to the CSC (see above) or the Drinking Water Inspectorate.

### **Drinking Water Inspectorate**

Floor 2/A1, Ashdown House

123 Victoria Street

London SW1E 6DE

Tel: 020 7082 8024

Fax: 020 7082 8028

Email: [dwi.enquiries@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:dwi.enquiries@defra.gsi.gov.uk)

Website: [www.dwi.gov.uk](http://www.dwi.gov.uk)