

Staying connected

Impartial advice and information
for energy customers



This booklet was compiled by Consumer Focus,
the independent body that represents energy consumers

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Emergencies | 2 |
| Glossary | 3 |
| Section 1 Understanding your bill | 5 |
| Section 2 Paying for your energy | 10 |
| Section 3 Switching supplier | 13 |
| Section 4 Moving home | 20 |
| Section 5 Getting connected – gas and electricity network issues | 22 |
| Section 6 If you're having difficulties making a payment | 23 |
| Section 7 Additional support for households | 25 |
| Section 8 Energy efficiency advice and the Green Deal | 25 |
| Section 9 Smart meters | 26 |
| Section 10 Resolving problems | 27 |
| Section 11 Who can help? | 29 |

Emergencies

Electricity power cuts

If you suffer from a power cut, the number to call will be on your bill or at www.nationalgrid.com/uk/Electricity/AboutElectricity/DistributionCompanies

Loss of gas supply

If you smell gas or have a sudden loss of **gas supply, call the 24 hour gas emergency hotline** immediately on **0800 111 999**.

If you think you have a gas leak:

- do not smoke or strike matches
- check you have not left any gas appliances on
- turn off the gas supply using the control valve which is usually next to the meter
- open doors and windows to let the gas out
- do not use electrical switches (or doorbells) or a naked flame
- and if your meter is located in a cellar or basement, it is recommended that you do not enter the area until the engineers have declared it safe

Energy theft

Tampering with a gas or electricity meter and associated equipment is very dangerous as there is a risk of electrical shock, electrocution or a gas explosion.

If you suspect your gas or electricity meter has been tampered with, or you suspect another householder of tampering with their gas or electricity meter, you should contact your supplier immediately.

If a supplier suspects that electricity or gas is being stolen, it can carry out a full investigation. Customers may have their supply disconnected and could also be prosecuted.

Glossary

Annual statement – If you have been with your supplier for more than 12 months, it is required to send you an annual statement once a year. The annual statement includes information about your tariff, annual energy usage, costs and the information you need to help compare tariffs and switch supplier.

Cancellation charge – A charge made when a customer wants to leave before the end date of their contract. This is also known as a termination fee or an exit fee.

Cooling off period – After you have agreed to switch supplier, you have 14 days to cancel your energy contract if you change your mind. This is also known as a cancellation period.

Green Deal – A Government-backed programme to help make energy efficiency affordable for consumers by enabling work to be paid for from expected savings in energy bills.

Kilowatt hour (kWh) – A unit of energy. Suppliers measure their customers' consumption in kilowatt hours when working out how to charge them. A single kWh will power a 15 watt energy saving light bulb for almost three days.

Meter Point Administration Number (MPAN) – a 21-digit reference number used to identify your electricity supply point. It is found on the electricity bill issued by your supplier. It may also be called the Supply Number or S-Number.

Meter Point Reference Number (MPRN) – a six to 10 digit reference number used to identify your gas supply point. It is found on the gas bills issued by your supplier. It may also be called the M-Number.

Ofgem – The **Office of the Gas and Electricity Markets** (the regulator of the energy and gas markets). Its first priority is protecting customers. It does this by promoting competition, wherever appropriate, and regulating the companies that run the gas and electricity networks.

Opening meter reading – The first meter reading you take after moving into a new property or after you have switched supplier. This will ensure your first bill is accurate.

Prepayment meter – A prepayment meter allows you to pay in advance for the energy you use by topping the meter up with credit using a payment key or card. They are often referred to as ‘Pay As You Go’ meters.

Price comparison website – Allows you to compare the prices of different suppliers. Look for one that has the **Ofgem Confidence Code** logo so that you know it is reliable.

Priority Services Register – Free benefits and services offered by your supplier if you are of pensionable age, disabled or chronically ill.

Security deposit – A sum of money suppliers are allowed to request up front if they are concerned that bills will not be paid. You will get the money back when you have shown your supplier you have paid your bills on time and in full for a year.

Smart meter – The next generation of gas and electricity meters with a range of additional functions. Standard meters have to be read manually by a meter reader but, as a result of new communications technology, smart meters can be read without anyone from the energy company visiting your home.

Standing charge – A fixed daily amount you pay your electricity or gas supplier for maintenance and other costs, such as meter reading and maintaining connection to the electricity or gas distribution network.

Supplier – The company that supplies your electricity and/or gas.

Switching – You have a choice over which supplier you use for your electricity and gas. If you move to another supplier this is known as switching.

Tariff – Most suppliers offer more than one tariff, for example Variable; Fixed; Online; and Economy 7 and may charge different prices depending on which tariff you're on.

Unit rate – The price per kWh of electricity or gas used.

Section 1

Understanding your bill

1 What information is my supplier required to give me on my bill?

Your usual bill has to contain:

- your name and address
- your supplier's address and phone number
- your customer reference/account number (on the front of the bill)
- the name of the tariff and, if it is a fixed-term product, when it ends
- your current balance (how much you owe or are in credit)
- the time period that the bill covers
- previous and current meter readings
- whether the bill is based on an estimated or actual reading
- how much energy you have used for this bill and in the past 12 months
- how much you pay for each unit of gas or electricity
- the amount of standing charge, if you have one
- details of any discounts
- the amount of VAT you have to pay
- the unique reference number for your electricity or gas supply ie the Meter Point Administration Number (MPAN) or the Meter Point Reference Number (MPRN)
- your meter serial number
- emergency phone numbers

- the telephone number for the Citizens Advice consumer service¹
- information about the Ombudsman Services: Energy
- if your supplier has not changed in the previous 12 months, your bill should compare how much energy you used in the period of the bill with the same period 12 months before
- Your bill should also tell you approximately how much you are likely to pay in the next 12 months if you continue to use the same amount of energy and prices stay the same.

2 **Will my energy supplier send me information about my actual energy consumption over a given period?**

Some consumers will get regular bills from their supplier and others will not. This depends on the kind of tariff you have, for example, you may not get regular bills if you have a prepayment meter. You can check your contract or contact your supplier to find out if you will get regular bills.

If you have been with your current supplier for longer than 12 months, you will get an annual statement every year. You will receive this no matter what type of meter or tariff you have – even if you do not get regular bills. This statement should remind you of the main terms and conditions of your contract and show:

- the name of your tariff and, if it is a fixed-term product, when it ends
- how much energy you have used in the past 12 months
- how much you are likely to pay in the next 12 months if you continue to use the same amount of energy and prices stay the same
- any premiums or discounts that may apply to your tariff in comparison to the supplier's standard tariff where the payment is by Direct Debit
- details of any cancellation charges if you end your contract early
- a reminder that you can change supplier
- where to go for impartial advice and information about switching supplier

¹ The back of your bill may refer to Consumer Direct instead. Consumer Direct was taken over by the Citizens Advice consumer service. The contact telephone number is the same

3 When and how must my meter be read?

How do I avoid getting estimated bills?

Your supplier must attempt to read your meter at least once every two years, although most will attempt to read it more frequently. This is called an actual meter reading.

It is a good idea to read your meter yourself regularly and give the reading to your supplier to make sure your bills are accurate. Contact details and methods for doing this are provided by suppliers on their bills and websites.

If you do not give your readings to your supplier, and your bill is based on estimated readings, this could result in under or over payments.

When visiting your home, an authorised meter reader must have an identity card with a photograph. A meter reader should never turn up without their card. Ask to see this card before allowing someone into your home, and do not let anybody in who does not have a card.

To make you feel safer, your supplier offers a password service. This means that its meter readers can quote your unique password to identify themselves. You may also be able to arrange an appointment for your supplier to come to read your meter at a specific time.

If you, and everyone else in your home, have problems reading your meter, and you are over 60, have a disability, are chronically sick, visually impaired or hearing impaired you can ask your supplier to read your meter four times a year free of charge.

4 Does my supplier have to explain how my bill is calculated?

Your bills and statement must give you information that explains what you are paying for. It must tell you how many units of energy you have used and how much you pay for each unit. It should also explain any other charges such as the standing charge or VAT.

[Question 1](#) explains what other information should be on your bill.

5 What are my rights as a customer paying by Direct Debit?

The amount of bills or statements you receive will depend on your supplier. You should receive a statement of your account at least once a year.

Your supplier needs to provide you with information on how your Direct Debit is calculated. It must also give you 10 days notice if it intends to make any changes to the amount, date or frequency of your Direct Debit.

Your supplier will regularly review your Direct Debit amount to ensure it will cover your ongoing usage.

- If your account is in credit at the end of the payment plan year, your supplier will refund the credit where it is fair and reasonable for them to do so
- If your Direct Debit has not covered your annual usage at the end of the payment plan year, the supplier will either take the amount as a lump sum or spread the amount over the next 12 months
- If you are in debt because your Direct Debit did not cover your usage, your supplier must agree a repayment plan that takes account of your ability to pay the debt

Providing your supplier with regular meter readings will help ensure that your Direct Debit amount is as accurate as possible.

Ofgem has published a **factsheet** with more information.

6 What is back-billing?

If you have not been correctly billed or not received a bill for a period exceeding 12 months there is a principle in place defining when and how far back your supplier can charge you.

Ofgem directed all suppliers to stop back-billing customers for periods of more than 12 months if the supplier was at fault for not having sent a bill to the customer. This requirement has been in place since 2007.

The back-billing principle may apply if your supplier has:

- Failed to bill you at all and you have requested a bill from them
- Billed you using estimated readings instead of valid readings provided by you or a meter reader

- Billed you incorrectly by mixing up meter readings, and failed to act upon information available to put this right
- Failed to do anything about a query or a fault you have raised regarding your account or meter and subsequently allowed a large debt to build up on your account
- Failed to reassess a payment arrangement (eg Direct Debit) within 15 months, or failed to reassess based on a reasonable estimate

Contact your supplier if you think you have been back-billed incorrectly. For further information see this **leaflet**

7 **Who do I contact if I do not understand my bill?**

If you do not understand the information on your bill, you should contact your supplier and ask them to explain it to you. Suppliers also all have sections on their websites explaining your bill.

8 **How do I find out the fuel mix of my electricity supply?**

The fuel mix is the percentage of electricity generated from coal, gas, nuclear, renewable and other sources. Details are also provided on the amount of CO2 and nuclear waste produced. All suppliers have to give this information to their customers once a year and it is also available on their websites.

Need more advice? Contact **Citizens Advice consumer service** on **08454 04 05 06** (**08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for further advice. It is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Section 2

Paying for your energy

9 Where do I go to find out more on different methods for paying for my electricity or gas bills?

You should contact your energy supplier to find out the different ways you can pay. All suppliers have to offer a range of payment options, but some options are cheaper than others. For example, if you pay by a monthly Direct Debit, you may receive a discount compared to paying by cash or cheque after you receive a bill.

10 What kind of tariffs are available?

Suppliers offer a wide range of different tariffs. Some of the most common types are standard, fixed price, capped price, online, green, time of use or off peak tariffs.

Your supplier will have a list of all its available tariffs on its website or you can contact it. You can also use a price comparison website that allows you to compare the prices of different suppliers.

11 What kind of electricity or gas meters are available?

Your electricity or gas meter will either be a 'credit' or a 'prepayment' meter.

If you have a credit meter then your supplier will bill you regularly for any electricity or gas that you use. You can pay for energy in a number of different ways including Direct Debit, cash or debit card, or, depending on which supplier you are with, by a weekly, fortnightly or monthly payment card.

Prepayment meters are often called 'Pay As You Go' meters. You are required to pay in advance for any electricity or gas you use. If the meter runs out of credit it will disconnect and you will not have an electricity or gas supply until you top it up with more credit.

However, your prepayment meter will have a certain amount of emergency credit which you can use until you are able to top up your meter again. Follow the instructions on your prepayment meter to activate the emergency credit. When you next top up your meter, you will need to pay back the emergency credit.

For gas prepayment meters, your credit will be used to pay back the emergency credit and 30 per cent of your top up will be allocated to your gas supply. Contact your supplier for more information about how emergency credit works.

Depending on your supplier, you will be able to top up your prepayment meters at Paypoint, Payzone or Post Office outlets. Your supplier will be able to provide you with a list of the nearest outlets.

Your electricity meter will be either:

- a single rate meter, where all your electricity is charged at the same rate, no matter what time of day you use it or
- a two or three rate meter where electricity is charged at different rates at different times of the day (for example Economy 7, Economy 10, White Meter Comfort Plus and Total Heat Total Control)

If you are not sure which type you have, check your meter. If it has more than one display then you have a two or three rate meter. If this is the case you should check to see whether you are on a special tariff that works with your meter, eg Economy 7.

Your supplier can provide more information about this including the type of meter you have and, if relevant, when the cheaper hours are and if you are benefitting from having this type of meter.

Gas meters only have a single rate. You will pay the same price regardless of when you use gas in your home.

12 How and when should I be notified of price changes by my supplier?

Your supplier has to tell you at least 30 calendar days in advance that it is going to raise its prices.

If you know your supplier is going to increase prices, you may want to switch to another supplier with cheaper prices. You will not be charged a cancellation charge to leave your fixed term contract early under these circumstances, providing you let your supplier know you wish to switch before the price change takes effect.

Your new supplier must contact your old supplier no more than 15 working days after you have notified them of your intention to switch. As long as this happens you will continue to be billed at the old prices until your switch is completed.

Your supplier does not need to give you any notice of a price decrease.

See [Question 22](#) and [26](#) for more information.

13 What steps should I take if I think that one of my contract terms has been changed without adequate notice? Who should I contact?

Your supplier should give you at least 30 calendar days advance notice of any significant variations to your contract that may disadvantage you, such as price increases.

If you are unhappy with your supplier's actions you should follow the complaints procedure explained in [Question 40](#).

14 What happens if my supplier goes out of business?

There is no reason to be worried if your supplier goes out of business (goes bankrupt). You will still get your energy supply.

But you may notice that your bills come less regularly. This is because a new supplier will buy the business or be put in charge of the company by Ofgem.

This may take a while to organise, so you should make sure you put enough money aside to pay for the energy you are using.

If Ofgem puts a new supplier in charge you will go on a deemed contract with a different price. If there is a 'trade sale' the name of your supplier will change.

You should also take a reading as soon as you hear your supplier is going out of business. You may need this to check future bills.

You may want to look at your contract to check what it says about ending your contract early and cancellation charges. Your energy supply will not be cut off, so there is no need to accept the first deal that sales agents offer you.

Need more advice? Contact **Citizens Advice consumer service** on **08454 04 05 06** (**08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for further advice. It is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Section 3

Switching supplier

15 What information do I need to compare tariffs from different energy suppliers?

When looking for the best tariff for you, you will need to know what tariff you are on and how much energy you use (kWh or how much you pay) every year. You should use this information when comparing tariffs to get the best possible estimate of your likely costs.

If you have been with your energy supplier for longer than 12 months, you will find this information on your annual statement or a recent bill, but if you cannot find it you can ask your supplier. See [Question 19](#) for information about the questions you should ask a potential new supplier before making a decision about whether to switch.

16 What tools are available to help me compare tariffs?

Before you decide to change supplier, you need to find out about tariffs that are right for you. You will need to know:

- how much energy do you use? (Check your bill or annual statement)
- how much can you afford to pay?
- what tariff type is best for you?
- what suppliers offer energy in your area?
- will the supplier you are with now charge you to end your contract?

It is worth contacting your current supplier to see if it can offer you a better tariff. You can also use a price comparison website that allows you to compare the prices of different suppliers. Look for one that has the **Confidence Code** logo.

The logo means that the site has been checked and is reliable. You can find a list of approved websites on the Ofgem website at: <http://bit.ly/Ofgemcode>. Many of the price comparison sites offer a telephone service.

17 How can I find out more information on ‘green tariffs’ offered by suppliers?

The **Green Energy Supply Certification Scheme** gives information on tariffs that are environmentally friendly. This means it matches your electricity supply with renewable energy and has other benefits for the environment. The Scheme is governed by guidelines published by Ofgem. All of the tariffs on the Green Energy Scheme website have been checked independently.

18 How do I switch energy supplier?

Find the best tariff for you by comparing the prices of different suppliers. The **Ofgem Confidence Code** is a good place to start to get a list of approved sites that offer a free switching service for consumers.

Contact the new supplier and tell them you want to switch

If you use an independent price comparison website, they will contact the supplier on your behalf

Changing supplier will take between three to five weeks following the end of your ‘cooling off’ period. Your new supplier will inform you of your new start date during this process

You do not have to contact your old supplier as your new supplier will contact them on your behalf

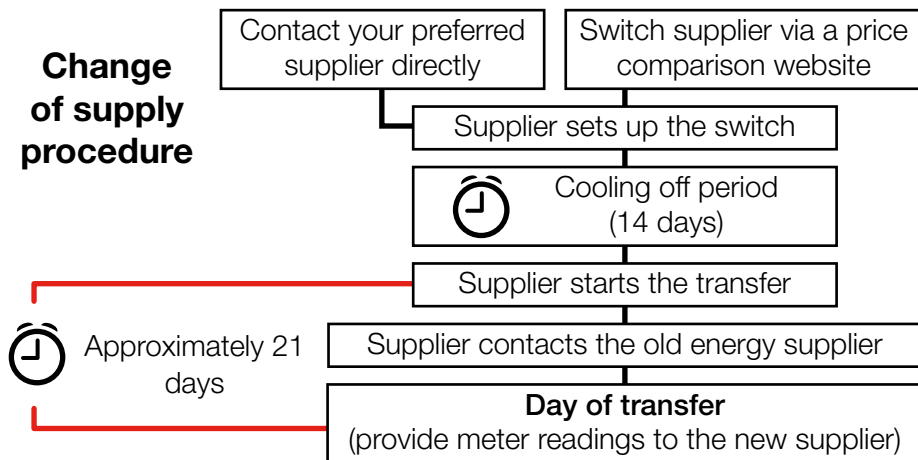
Your new supplier will ask you for an opening meter reading. This is to ensure that your account is set up accurately. You may wish to keep a note of this reading for future reference

Your old supplier will send you a final bill to pay based on a reading provided by your new supplier

You do not need to pay to switch. However, the terms and conditions of your old contract may state that a cancellation charge applies for your old tariff, for instance if you were on a fixed-term contract and leave before the end of the contract

In the vast majority of cases, switching supplier is a smooth and error free process. A very small number of people do encounter issues. If you experience a problem with your switch you should contact your supplier. Which supplier to contact (old or new) depends on the nature of the problem.

For example, if it relates to ending your old energy contract you should contact your old supplier. Alternatively, if you are having difficulty setting up your new contract, contact your new supplier. Suppliers have committed to working with each other to resolve any problems you experience.



19 What information should I ask for from a potential supplier before entering a contract?

Your energy contract is a legally binding document. It is important that you understand what you are agreeing to when you enter into a contract. An energy contract can be agreed over the telephone, online or signed face-to-face with a sales adviser. Your new supplier must provide you with written confirmation of your energy contract.

You should ask a potential supplier for information about:

- unit prices of gas and electricity
- standing charges
- the terms and conditions of the tariff
- length of contract (if fixed term)
- discounts
- cancellation charges – for example if you want to end your contract early

If something is not in your contract, it is not part of the tariff. Make sure the contract includes everything you have agreed to.

Take time to consider the whole document. Your supplier will give you 14 days to change your mind about the contract after you have agreed it. This is called the cooling off period.

20 What is the maximum length of time a supplier is able to tie a consumer into in a contract?

There is no maximum length. Some suppliers do offer fixed term contracts (contracts for a specific period), but these generally last for one to two years.

21 Once I have accepted a contract will I be sent a full copy of it?

You should be provided with a copy of the full contract either at the time you sign or as soon as possible afterwards. You should not sign a contract if you believe that any part of it may be missing. If a sales agent says that part of your contract will be sent in the future, do not sign until you have received all the information you need to make a decision about whether this is the right tariff for you.

You can ask your supplier to send you a copy of your contract at any time.

If you agree to a tariff online or over the telephone, your supplier will send you a copy of your contract in the post. Alternatively it will send an email that includes the terms and conditions of your contract or a link to the website where you can find this information.

22 Will it cost me any money to change tariff or supplier?

It depends on the kind of contract you have with your current energy supplier. It is worth checking if there is a cancellation charge if you want to end your contract early.

Your supplier cannot charge you if:

- you have reached the end of your contract
- you have a variable contract that is not for a specific price and period of time (also referred to as a standard or an evergreen contract)

- you have a fixed term contract but not a specific price and your supplier has increased the price

You can ask your supplier for a copy of your contract if you can't remember what type you have.

If you think you have been unfairly charged to change supplier contact your original supplier.

23 Will I be asked for a deposit or connection charge when I sign a new energy contract?

In some cases your supplier may ask for a security deposit before agreeing to a new energy supply contract. For example, if you have had problems paying bills in the past or if you are not on the electoral roll (the list of people who can vote in this country).

If your supplier asks for a security deposit, they cannot ask for an unreasonable sum of money. You will get the money back when you have shown your supplier you have paid your bills on time and in full for a year. Ask your supplier for more information. Your supplier cannot ask for a security deposit if you're prepared to take your supply through a prepayment meter (where it is suitable for you to do so).

Some suppliers may, instead of a security deposit, accept the name of someone who will guarantee to pay your energy bills if you fail to. You can also look around for a supplier which does not require you to pay a security deposit. Some suppliers will waive a security deposit if you agree to pay by Direct Debit.

You will not have to pay a connection charge if you already have a meter in your home. See [Question 33](#) for information on getting a new electricity or gas connection to your home.

24 When switching supplier is there a risk my energy supply will be disconnected?

No. Your new supplier will use the same wires, pipes and meters as your previous supplier. The only change you should notice is a different supplier name at the top of your bills.

25 I have switched energy supplier, do I still have to pay bills that arrive from my previous supplier?

You should not pay for any energy that has been used after your switch date. Your old supplier will send you a final bill to pay based on a reading provided by your new supplier.

You have to pay for all energy used up to the date before you switched supplier.

If you and your previous supplier have disagreed over a final meter reading, you may get another final bill some time after you switch supplier.

26 Are there any reasons why I would not be able to switch energy supplier?

The majority of consumers have no problem switching supplier, but you may have problems switching if:

- you are in debt to your supplier; that is you have not paid your bill at least 28 days after receiving it
- you have a special meter or tariff that other suppliers cannot support

However, if you have an outstanding balance with a supplier, you may still be able to switch if:

- you pay for your energy in advance via a prepayment meter and have a debt of less than £500
- your supplier has increased its prices and you have said you want to switch and are able to pay off your outstanding balance within 30 days
- you have an outstanding balance because your supplier has made a mistake

It is also worth checking if there is a cancellation charge if you want to end your contract early.

If you are having a problem, you should call your supplier.

27 What is the Maximum Resale Price?

If you do not have a direct relationship with a supplier you are unlikely to be able to switch supplier, for instance if you pay your landlord directly for any gas or electricity used.

The Maximum Resale Price limits how much your landlord can charge you for mains gas or mains electricity. Your landlord can only charge you the amount they paid for gas or electricity including the standing charge, plus 5 per cent VAT.

Maximum Resale Price applies if you:

- rent your home and pay the landlord for the gas or electricity used
- are a leaseholder and buy your gas or electricity from the landlord
- are a student and buy your gas or electricity from the landlord
- own or rent a caravan and buy gas or electricity from the caravan site or park owner
- rent a holiday home or chalet and buy gas or electricity from the owner
- own a houseboat or marine craft and buy gas or electricity from the moorings operator

If requested, your landlord must produce evidence, for example copies of any bills from the supplier showing how much gas or electricity has been used. If there is more than one tenant living at the property, the landlord should also explain how each tenant's contribution was calculated.

Maximum Resale Price doesn't apply if the gas or electricity is recovered as part of an inclusive charge eg you pay a set fee for accommodation that covers all costs.

Landlords are also entitled to recover charges for other costs such as the maintenance and upkeep of their supply system, gas or electricity used in communal areas or administrative charges for reading individual sub-meters. These charges are not covered by the Maximum Resale Price regulations and should be billed separately, for example within the rent or as part of other service charges.

Ofgem publishes a **leaflet** on the rules governing the Maximum Resale Price regulations.

Need more advice? Contact **Citizens Advice consumer service** on **08454 04 05 06** (**08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for further advice. It is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Section 4

Moving home

28 How do I cancel my contract?

When moving home, you can stay with your existing supplier. Just let your supplier know you wish to stay with it at your new address and it can arrange everything for you.

If you would like to switch supplier, check with your existing supplier whether you are on a fixed term tariff as it may charge you to end your contract early. You will also need to be billed for all the energy you have used before moving, so take a meter reading on the day you move and give it to your current supplier. You need to contact your supplier even if you pay for your energy using a prepayment meter.

Tell your current energy supplier at least two days before your move. If you don't tell your supplier, you may experience a delay in obtaining your final bill or it may not be accurate. Until you provide notification of your move to your supplier or someone else moves in and takes up the supply contract, then you will be liable for all energy used.

29 I have moved house. Do I still have to pay my bills for my old address?

You have to pay for any energy you used before you changed address. If you move house without paying a bill, it becomes a debt after 28 days.

Sometimes, your final bill from your old address can be delayed or your supplier may need to re-calculate it after it gets your final meter reading. You will need to pay in either of these situations.

As long as you told your supplier that you were moving home and gave them a closing meter reading, you are not responsible for energy used after the date you moved out of the property.

30 I have moved house. How do I find out who my electricity or gas supplier is?

Electricity

For electricity, contact your local distribution network operator by looking in the phone book or on www.energynetworks.org/info/faqs/who-is-my-network-operator.html

You will need to tell them your address and your meter serial number. You should find this number on a sticker on your meter. The distribution company should give you a name and a telephone number for your supplier.

Gas

For gas, contact the Meter Point Reference line on **0870 608 1524**. Telephone lines are open Monday to Sunday, 8.00am – 8.00pm. It has a list of gas suppliers for your area.



31 I have moved house. How do I get a new energy supplier?

If you have moved into a new home, you automatically have a contract with the same supplier as the person who lived in the home before you. This is to protect you from having no energy supply when you move in. This is known as a deemed contract.

If you do not want to be supplied by this supplier, you should organise another contract with a supplier of your choice. Normally when you apply to switch to a new supplier, it will automatically inform your current supplier about your intention to leave.

You are responsible for paying the bills from the current supplier for any energy used up until the date your new supplier takes over.

Need more advice? Contact Citizens Advice consumer service on **08454 04 05 06** (**08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for further advice. It is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Section 5

Getting connected – gas and electricity network issues

32 Who do I contact to be supplied with electricity or gas for the first time?

When you move into a new home, you automatically have a contract with the supplier of the person who lived in the home before you. You will need to find out who the supplier is, if you do not already know. See [Question 30](#) for information on how to do this.

All properties must have a Meter Point Administration Number (MPAN) for electricity/Meter Point Reference Number (MPRN) for gas. If you move into a new building, or if a meter has been replaced, the company that installed the meter may have forgotten to make sure the property has one. If this has happened to you, you can choose any supplier. But you must tell your chosen supplier that you need a new MPAN/MPRN.

The supply may not be connected straight away so you should provide as much notice as possible.

33 Do I have to sign a contract to get a new energy connection created?

Yes. If you don't have an electricity or gas connection at your home you can arrange the connection through a gas transporter or electricity distribution network operator (these are the companies that are responsible for transporting your energy). The contact details are available on Ofgem's [website](#).

You will then need to find a supplier (the company you will pay for energy once you are connected). You can choose the supplier that offers the best tariff for you, but you will need to agree a deal and sign a contract. You can also find a supplier first and ask them to handle the connection for you. The supplier may add on charges for doing this so it is a good idea to check beforehand.

If you do not choose a supplier, the connection may not be completed, and you will have no energy supply.

Need more advice? Contact **Citizens Advice consumer service** on **08454 04 05 06** (**08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for further advice. It is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Section 6

If you're having difficulties making a payment

34 What happens if I can't pay my bill?

Contact your supplier as soon as possible.

Your bill usually becomes a debt if it remains outstanding after the 'payment due date'. So it is important to tell your supplier as soon as possible if you are having problems paying and it will do its best to help you.

If you do not contact your supplier, it will contact you to discuss ways to make it easier for you to pay. These may include:

- paying by regular instalments (for example cash, debit card, Direct Debit, etc)
- installing a prepayment meter (if it is suitable for your needs)
- agreeing for payments to be deducted from your benefits so that you pay regularly (this is known as Fuel Direct)

Your supplier will discuss with you what you can afford to pay toward the debt each week or month. It must take your ability to pay into account when setting the debt repayment rate. Your supplier should also offer you advice on how to use less energy in the future.

If you still cannot pay, speak to your supplier or, for independent advice, one of the debt advice agencies listed in [Question 44](#).

A debt advice agency can help you prepare a financial statement that explains how much money you have coming in and how much you have to spend every month.

35 How can I avoid disconnection if I cannot pay my bill? **If you don't pay your bill**

If your bill remains unpaid, your supplier can apply to the courts for a right of entry warrant in order to access your meter (even if this is inside your home). Your supplier has to tell you in advance that it is going to apply for a warrant as there will be a court hearing, which you can attend and have your say in front of the magistrate. If you live in Scotland, you will need to write to the court manager.

If the magistrate grants a warrant, your supplier could then disconnect your supply. However, in most cases where they are able to do so and it is suitable for you, suppliers will seek to fit a prepayment meter instead of disconnecting your supply.

Suppliers have agreed not to knowingly disconnect, at any time during the year, anyone who is considered vulnerable. These are households that may have people who need additional support. This may include people with a chronic illness, those with a disability, households with young children and older adults.

In addition between October and March suppliers **must not** disconnect a premises if there are pensioners who live alone, or only with other pensioners, or with children under 18. Suppliers must also try to avoid disconnecting properties during the winter period where any pensioners, disabled or chronically sick people live. In both instances suppliers have to take all reasonable steps to identify whether a consumer falls into these groups before disconnecting them.

36 How do I get reconnected? **Getting reconnected**

If your supplier disconnects you, it will give you contact details so you can discuss paying off your debt and how you can be reconnected. For example, it may offer you a prepayment meter, which allows you to have a supply of energy and pay off the money you owe bit by bit as you top up your meter. What your supplier agrees with you will depend on your past payment history and your circumstances.

Your supplier may add a reconnection fee, administrative costs associated with disconnection and reconnection and a security deposit to the money you owe.

Need more advice? Contact **Citizens Advice consumer service** on **08454 04 05 06** (**08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for further advice. It is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Section 7

Additional support for households

37 What is the Priority Services Register?

If you are of pensionable age, disabled, or chronically sick, you can ask to join your supplier's Priority Services Register. It entitles you to a range of free services including:

- a password to prove that a visitor is a representative of the supplier or distribution company
- bills in large print or Braille
- free repositioning of a prepayment meter if it can't be accessed easily
- free meter reading every quarter if you or no-one else in the property can do it
- sending a bill to a nominated representative of the consumer
- free annual gas safety checks for qualifying customers

Need more advice? Contact **Citizens Advice consumer service** on **08454 04 05 06** (**08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for further advice. It is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Section 8

Energy efficiency advice and the Green Deal

38 Where do I go to get energy efficiency advice?

Your energy supplier can provide you with information on how to save energy, either over the telephone or via its website. Your supplier will also give you energy efficiency advice if you are having difficulties paying your bill and may offer suggestions to help you reduce your bill in future.

You can also contact the Government-funded Energy Saving Advice Service for free independent advice based on your personal situation and information on energy efficiency grants and how to apply for them. For online advice, visit www.gov.uk/energyhelp. Or you can call **0300 123 1234** for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For Scotland call **0800 512 012**.

The Energy Saving Advice Service will also provide information on the 'Green Deal'. The Green Deal launched in October 2012 and provides new ways for consumers to pay for energy efficiency improvements from expected savings in energy bills.

Need more advice? Contact **Citizens Advice consumer service** on **08454 04 05 06** (**08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for further advice. It is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Section 9

Smart meters

39 What are smart meters?

The Government has asked Britain's energy suppliers to install smart meters in every home in the country by 2019. These will replace existing electricity and gas meters. Smart meters are the next generation of gas and electricity meters and are designed to give you more awareness of your energy use.

Unlike standard meters which have to be read manually by a meter reader, thanks to new communications technology smart meters can be read by the energy supplier without anyone having to visit your home. This should end estimated and inaccurate bills.

Until now, gas and electricity meters have measured the total amount of energy you have used – but not when you have used it. Smart meters will help you to access accurate and up-to-date information on the energy you are using in your home. Smart meters will be able to operate in either credit or prepayment mode, giving you more flexibility and choice on the way you want to pay for your energy. In addition to a smart meter, you will be offered an energy display which will help you understand and reduce your energy consumption.

Some energy suppliers are already installing smart meters and others are carrying out trials. Full scale roll-out is due to start in 2014. If you are interested in getting a smart meter early we recommend you shop around and contact different energy suppliers to see what their plans are. Future national and local campaigns will provide further information on how smart metering will be delivered to you.

Consumer Focus has a section on its website with a series of questions and answers containing more information on smart meters. See <http://bit.ly/Smartmeters>

Need more advice? Contact Citizens Advice consumer service on **08454 04 05 06** (**08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for further advice. It is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Section 10

Resolving problems

40 How to complain if a problem arises

If you are not happy with your gas or electricity supplier, information about how to complain can be found on your bill, or on your supplier's website.

If your complaint is about the way your energy is provided to your home, including issues such as new connections, gas mains replacement activities or electricity cable diversions, you should contact your gas transporter or electricity distributor directly. Its contact details will be on your energy bill or look in the phone book.

For all other issues, in the first instance you should contact your energy company to resolve your complaint. Energy companies must attempt to resolve the complaint to your satisfaction within eight weeks. If the issue has not been resolved after eight weeks (or sooner if the company says they can do no more; known as deadlock), you can take your complaint to the Ombudsman Services: Energy using their **online form** or by calling **0330 440 1624**. It is able to accept complaints from customers where companies have been given a reasonable opportunity to resolve them.

Ombudsman Services: Energy is an independent body which provides a free service to customers who are in dispute with their energy company. The Ombudsman is responsible for investigating individual complaints made against energy companies by consumers and will make a binding decision on the company as to how the complaint should be resolved.

Should you require advice or help on making a complaint, you can ask to see your company's complaints procedure or you can contact **Citizens Advice consumer service**, Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm, on **08454 04 05 06** (or **08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for free, independent advice. Alternatively you can use the **online form** on the Direct.gov website.

See [Section 11](#) for contact details.

41 Is there a minimum level of supply quality? Am I entitled to compensation if the set quality of supply is not met?

Yes. You may be entitled to a small amount of compensation if your gas and electricity supply does not meet the minimum standards – this can include issues such as power cuts, loss of gas supply, disputes about meter accuracy or missed appointments.

These are known as the **Guaranteed Standards of Performance**. Suppliers, electricity distributors and gas transporters should operate to these standards. You can contact your supplier for more information. If you think your supply does not meet these standards, you should follow the complaints procedure set out in [Question 40](#).

Need more advice? Contact **Citizens Advice consumer service** on **08454 04 05 06** (**08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh) for further advice. It is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm.

Section 11

Who can help?

This section has details for organisations to contact if you need further help or advice.

42 Who is responsible for consumer protection?

Several organisations help protect energy consumers.

- **Citizens Advice consumer service** provides independent advice to energy consumers, including how to make a complaint. Your energy supplier has to include Citizens Advice consumer service's contact details on the back of your bill. You can contact Citizens Advice consumer service on **08454 04 05 06** (or **08454 04 05 05** if you speak Welsh). Citizens Advice consumer service is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm. https://forms.adviceguide.org.uk/complaint_energy.aspx
- The **Ombudsman Services: Energy** offers free help to consumers who are not happy with the way their supplier or distribution company has handled a complaint. Your energy supplier has to include the Ombudsman's contact details on the back of your bill. The Ombudsman Services: Energy cannot investigate the complaint until the energy company has had the chance to investigate it (see [Question 40](#)). You can contact the Ombudsman Services: Energy on **0330 440 1624**, Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm, or use its **online enquiry form**
- **Ofgem** promotes competition between energy companies so that consumers get a fair deal. It has introduced standards that suppliers must meet before they get a licence to supply energy. Ofgem does not investigate individual consumer complaints but it has set rules which suppliers and distribution companies should follow when handling consumer complaints

- **Consumer Focus** advocates for a better deal for energy consumers and provides general advice. It also has a responsibility to help vulnerable consumers who have been disconnected, or are at risk of disconnection or who need additional help to resolve their complaint. If you think you may be a vulnerable consumer, you should contact **Citizens Advice consumer service** who may refer you to Consumer Focus, Extra Help Unit

43 **What organisations or bodies can help me to find out more about switching supplier?**

Citizens Advice consumer service can give general advice on switching supplier or your rights as an energy consumer. You can contact them Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm, on **08454 04 05 06**. For advice in Welsh, you can call **08454 04 05 05**.

For online advice, visit the **Consumer Focus** website. It has useful information on switching energy providers.

If you are using another website to compare energy prices, look out for the **Ofgem Confidence Code** logo. Sites with this logo are safe to use because they meet the minimum standards set by Consumer Focus for comparing energy prices.

For advice based on your personal situation, contact **Citizens Advice** or **Citizens Advice Scotland**. You can find your local office on their websites. Or you can visit the **Citizens Advice Adviceguide** website for more general information about switching supplier.

44 **What support and protection are available for energy consumers in financial hardship?**

Support with financial hardship

Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland

Provide general advice based on your personal situation.

The website gives you details of your local office.

Online advice: www.adviceguide.org.uk

www.citizensadvice.org.uk or www.cas.org.uk (Scotland)

StepChange Debt Advice Charity

Provides free, anonymous debt advice.

Helpline: **0800 138 1111**, Monday to Friday 8.00am – 8.00pm,
Saturday 9.00am – 4.00pm

www.stepchange.org

National Debtline

Free, confidential and independent money advice based on your personal situation. Helps people across the UK to tackle their debts and manage their money wisely.

Tel: **0808 808 4000**

Opening hours: Monday to Friday 9.00am – 9.00pm;

Saturday 9.30am – 1.00pm

<http://www.nationaldebtline.co.uk/>

My Money Steps

Free and easy to use online debt advice and money management service from National Debtline. Personalised, positive steps to help you get back in control of your finances.

<https://www.mymoneysteps.org/>

Help paying your bills

Your supplier

Some suppliers automatically provide a **Warm Home Discount** to eligible electricity customers, including pensioners who receive the Guarantee Credit element of Pension Credit, but not the Saving Credit element, and also pensioners aged 80 and over who are receiving both Guarantee Credit and Savings Credit elements of Pension Credit. In winter 2012/13 the discount was £130.

Suppliers also provide support to other low income or vulnerable households which meet certain criteria. Contact your supplier to see if you are eligible for this discount.

Home Heat Helpline

Supplier-funded helpline that provides information to people worried about paying their energy bills and keeping warm during the winter. Provides information about grants, benefits and payment schemes as well as energy efficiency advice.

Tel: **0800 33 6699**, Monday to Friday 9.00am – 6.00pm,

Saturdays 10.00am – 2.00pm

www.homeheathelpline.org.uk/

Trust funds

Some suppliers have trust funds that can offer help to customers struggling to pay their energy bills.

Charis Grants

Tel: **01733 421 021**

www.charisgrants.com/

45 Where can I find out about grants and schemes to help me save energy?

Help with saving energy

Your supplier

Contact your supplier's energy efficiency team for information about saving energy and insulation.

Energy Saving Advice Service

Government-funded service providing impartial advice on how to save energy in homes and businesses.

Tel: **0300 123 1234**, Monday to Friday 9.00am – 8.00pm,
Saturdays 10.00am – 2.00pm (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)

Tel: **0800 512 012**, Monday to Friday 9.00am – 8.00pm,
Saturdays 10.00am – 2.00pm (Scotland)

NEST (Wales only)

Welsh Government scheme to help reduce fuel poverty.

Provides a range of advice, as well as a full home energy assessment and home improvements at no cost to eligible households.

Tel: **0800 512 012** or **0300 456 2655**

www.nestwales.org.uk

Energy Assistance Package (Scotland only)

Provides access to grants and information to increase energy efficiency and incomes.

Tel: **0800 512 012**

Warm Zones Scheme (parts of England and Scotland only)

Provides financial support and practical advice to vulnerable people. Website explains whether help is available in your area.

www.warmzones.co.uk

Your local authority

Your local authority may be able to help with saving energy and getting insulation for your home.

Consumer Focus
Victoria House
Southampton Row
London WC1B 4AD

t: 020 7799 7900
f: 020 7799 7901
e: contact@consumerfocus.org.uk
www.consumerfocus.org.uk

Media team: 020 7799 8004/8006

Published: February 2013

If you have any questions or would like further information about our research, please contact Consumer Focus, by telephone on 020 7799 7900 or via email contact@consumerfocus.org.uk

For regular updates from Consumer Focus, sign up to our monthly e-newsletter by emailing enews@consumerfocus.org.uk or follow us on Twitter <http://twitter.com/consumerfocus>

If you require this publication in Braille, large print or on audio CD please contact us.

Deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired consumers can contact Consumer Focus via Text Relay:

From a textphone, call 18001 020 7799 7900

From a telephone, call 18002 020 7799 7900