

Staying connected

Important information for energy customers

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What is this booklet?

This booklet has important information for gas and electricity customers in England, Scotland and Wales. It will help you:

- find the right gas and electricity deals
- understand what to expect from a gas or electricity supplier
- understand your responsibilities as a customer
- know what to do if you cannot pay your bill or there is another problem

It also tells you about organisations that help energy consumers.

You can find more details about any of the issues in the booklet by visiting: <http://bit.ly/n8K23r>.

1 Setting up a new energy supply

Before you move home

You need to tell your energy supplier at least two days before you move home.

Your supplier may charge you to end your contract early if it was for a fixed period of time – usually one or two years.

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 previous supplier.

If you do not tell your supplier about your move, you may experience a delay in obtaining your final bill or it may not be accurate.

Moving into a new home

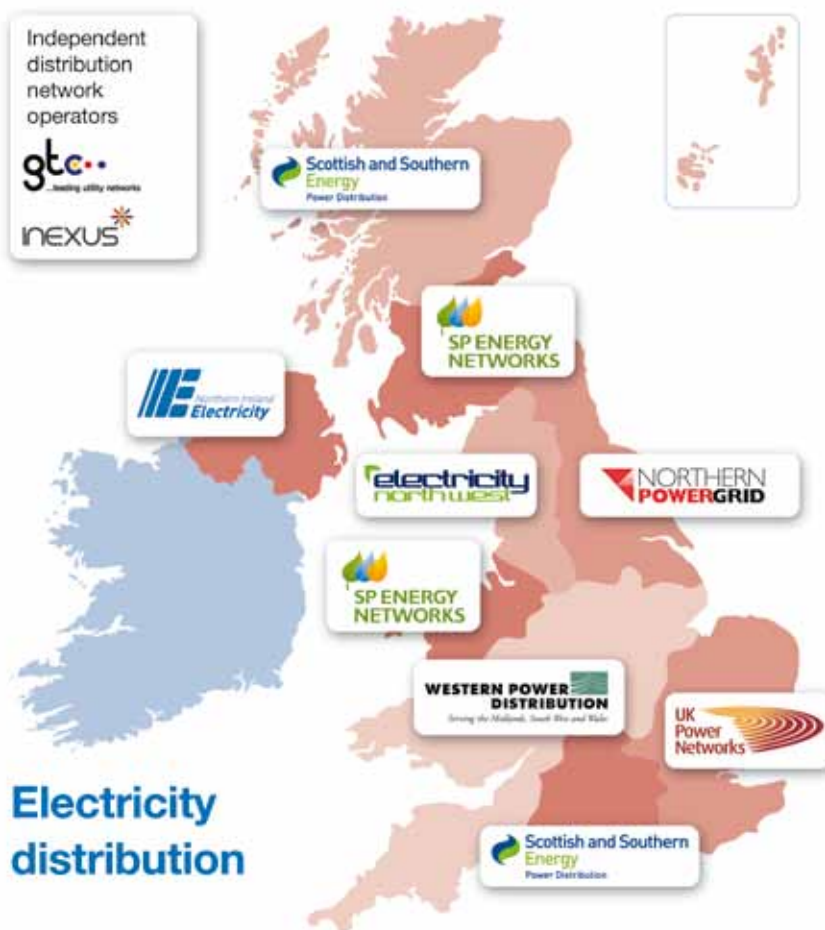
When you move into a new home, you automatically have a contract with the same supplier as the person who lived in the home before you.

You can choose whether to stay with this supplier or choose another (see Section 2).

You will also have to pay bills to the current supplier until the date your new contract starts.

Finding out who your supplier is

For electricity, contact your local distribution network company using the map below. You will need to tell them your address and your meter serial number. You should find this number on a sticker on your meter.



Courtesy of Energy Networks Association – accurate as of December 2011

Electricity North West

0870 751 0093

Northern Powergrid

0845 330 0889

Scottish Power (SP Energy Networks)

0845 270 9101

SSE Power Distribution

0845 0262554

UK Power Networks

0870 9009690

Western Power Distribution

0845 6015972

For more information see: <http://bit.ly/txxZ7q>

For gas, contact Xoserve on 0870 608 1524. It has a list of gas suppliers for your area.

Before you agree a contract

Because your contract is protected by law, it is important that you understand what you are agreeing to when you sign up to a contract. This can be agreed over the telephone, online or face to face with a sales agent.

Your contract has to include information about:

- unit prices of gas and electricity
- discounts and penalties
- standing charges
- the terms and conditions of tariffs
- cancellation rights
- length of contract (if fixed term)

If something is not in your contract, it is not part of the deal. So make sure it includes everything you have agreed to and there are no blanks.

Take time to consider the whole document. Your supplier should give you two weeks to change your mind about the contract after you have agreed it.

Paying for your energy

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 will usually pay less than if you pay after you get your bill in the post.

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

There is no maximum deposit, but it has to be a reasonable amount. You do get the money back with interest after a year as long as you pay your bills on time.

Before it asks you for a deposit, a supplier has to give you other options, including:

- option of a pre-payment meter
- Fuel Direct scheme (taking payments direct from your benefits)
- Direct Debit scheme
- regular payment scheme

If none of these options are right for you, you can try proving to the supplier that you have a good credit history or giving the name of someone who will guarantee to pay your energy bills if you fail to pay them. You can also look around for a supplier which doesn't require you to pay a deposit.

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

Your supplier has to give you 30 days' notice if it is going to change its prices.

If you know your supplier is going to increase prices, you can decide to switch to another supplier with cheaper prices. You should not be charged to leave your contract early under these circumstances if you give notice before or on the day the price goes up.

If your home does not have an energy supply

If you move into a home that does not already have an electricity or gas supply 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). See the map in Section 1 for the appropriate contact details or you can contact Consumer Direct (see Section 6) for advice. You may need to pay a connection charge if the supplier has to make changes or extend part of the existing network. The supply may not be connected straight away so you should provide as much notice as possible.

2 Switching supplier

Before you decide to switch

Before you switch (change) supplier, it would be advisable to know how much energy you use and how much you pay every year.

You should find this information on your annual statement, but if you cannot find it you can ask your supplier.

Finding the best deal

When you know how much energy you use and how much you pay each year, you can compare how much different suppliers would charge you over the same period. It is also worthwhile contacting your current supplier to see if it can offer you a better deal.

You can contact suppliers directly to ask them about their deals. Or you can use a price comparison website that allows you to compare the prices of different suppliers. Look for one that has the Consumer Focus Confidence Code logo. This logo means that the site has been checked and is reliable.



You can find a list of approved websites on the Consumer Focus website at www.consumerfocus.org.uk/get-advice/energy/confidence-code. The website also has contact details for all energy suppliers.

If you decide to switch

- Depending on whether you have signed up via direct contact with a supplier or through a comparison website, contact your new supplier and tell them you want to change. It should do most of the work for you and will give a date when the switch will take place
- If you use a price comparison website they will contact the supplier on your behalf
- Once you have been advised of the start date by your new supplier, call the supplier you are with now and tell them the date you are switching

- On that date, make sure you take a meter reading. Your new supplier may call to ask for a reading on this date. Take a note of the reading in the unlikely event if there are problems later on
- Make sure you pay your final bill to your previous supplier

Will you have to pay to switch?

In most cases you will not need to pay to switch supplier.

The exception is where the terms and conditions of your contract state that an early termination fee applies, usually on fixed term contracts.

Problems switching supplier

You may have problems switching if:

- you are in debt to your supplier eg you haven't paid your bill 28 days after it was sent
- you have a special meter or tariff that other suppliers cannot support
- However, if you are in debt with a supplier, you may be able to switch if:
- you pay for your energy in advance via a prepayment meter and have a debt of less than £200
- your supplier has increased their prices and you have said you want to switch but your supplier has blocked your switch and you are able to pay off your debt within 30 days
- you are in debt because your supplier has made a mistake

If you are having problems, you can call Consumer Direct for advice (see Section 6).

3 Understanding your bill

How often should you get a bill?

Some customers will get bills regularly and others will not. It depends on the type of tariff (deal) you have with your supplier. You can speak to your supplier or check your contract to see if you will receive bills.

But no matter what kind of tariff you have, if you have been with your supplier for longer than 12 months, you should get a statement once a year to remind you:

- the name of your tariff
- how much energy you have used in the past 12 months
- how much you will pay in the next 12 months if you continue to use the same amount of energy
- whether you can get any discounts
- how to switch suppliers if you want to

Information your bill should contain

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 you have
- your current balance (how much you owe or are in credit)
- the time period that the bill covers
- previous and current meter readings
- the number of units of energy you have used – for this bill and over the last 12 months
- how much you pay for each unit of energy
- how much you will pay in the next year if your energy use and price remain the same
- the amount of standing charge, if you have one
- details of any discounts
- the amount of VAT you have to pay
- the MPRN / MPAN (unique reference number for the supply)
- your meter serial number
- emergency phone numbers
- the telephone number for Consumer Direct (on the back of your bill)
- information about the Ombudsman Services: Energy (on the back of your bill)

Meter readings

While your supplier only has to read your meter once every two years, most try to do so quarterly or at least annually. It is a good idea to read your meter yourself regularly and give the reading to your supplier. Contact details for doing this are usually provided by suppliers on their bills and other communications with you. If you do not, your bill will be based on estimated readings and you may receive a catch up bill or you may have over-paid.

If you have problems reading your meter, you can ask to go on your supplier's Priority Services Register (PSR) if you are over 60, have a disability, are chronically sick, visually impaired or hearing impaired. Then you can ask your supplier to read your meter four times a year free of charge.

Other services are available for customers on the PSR. See Section 6 for more information.

An authorised meter reader must have an identity card with a photograph. A 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.

If it makes you feel safe, you may be able to arrange an appointment for your supplier to come to read your meter at a specific time.

If you cannot understand your bill

If you don't understand the information on your bill, you should contact your supplier and ask them to explain it to you or you can contact Consumer Direct (see Section 6).

4 If you cannot pay

Contact your supplier as soon as possible

Your bill becomes a debt if it remains outstanding after the 'payment due date'. So it is important to let your supplier know as soon as possible if you are having problems paying.

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)
- having a prepayment meter
- having money taken from your benefits so that you pay regularly (Fuel Direct)

Your supplier should not ask you to pay more in each payment than you can afford. It should offer you advice on how to save energy and spend less in the future.

If you still cannot pay, speak to your supplier or one of the debt advice agencies in Section 6. An 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.

Help for vulnerable customers

Energy suppliers will try not to disconnect customers they think are vulnerable. These are people who cannot take care of their own welfare or the welfare of the people they live with. This includes chronically ill people, disabled people and older people. If your circumstances make you vulnerable, speak to your supplier or Consumer Direct (see Section 6), who may be able to refer you to an agency that can help.

Disconnection

If you still do not pay your bill, your supplier can apply for a warrant for rights of entry in order to access your meter. It can then disconnect your gas or electricity supply. It has to tell you in advance if this is what it is going to do. There will be a court hearing, which you can attend and have your say.

The magistrate who hears your case will consider your financial statement when making a decision about whether to give your supplier a warrant.

In most cases and where they are able to do so, suppliers will seek to fit a prepayment meter instead of disconnecting your supply.

If the courts decide to grant your supplier a warrant, your supplier should tell you when it will visit your house to fit the prepayment meter or disconnect your supply.

Suppliers must not disconnect people in winter if they are pensioners:

- who live alone or only with other pensioners or children under 18
- and are disabled or chronically sick

Getting reconnected

If your supplier disconnects you, it will tell you how to contact them to discuss paying off your debt and getting reconnected. For example, it may offer you a prepayment meter, which allows you to have energy and pay off the money you owe bit by bit as you credit your meter. What your supplier agrees with you will depend on your past history with the company and your circumstances.

Your supplier can add a reconnection fee, administrative costs and a deposit to the money you owe.

5 Dealing with problems

If you have a power cut

If you suddenly lose your electricity supply, call your local distribution network company and report the issue. You can find the number on your electricity bill, use chart in Section 1 or look in the phone book under 'electricity'.

If you have a gas leak

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

- Do not smoke or strike matches
- Check that you have not left any gas appliances on
- Turn off the gas supply using the control valve, which is usually next to your meter
- Open doors and windows to let the gas out
- Do not use electrical switches (or doorbells) or a naked flame

How to complain if a problem arises

If you want to complain about anything to do with your gas or electricity supply, you should complain directly to your energy supplier. You can also complain directly to your gas transporter or electricity distributor, if your complaint is about the way your energy is provided. Energy companies have up to eight weeks to resolve the complaint to your satisfaction (unless there are unusual circumstances).

Complaints can be about any issue, including:

- problems with your bill or payments
- potentially being misold a contract

- issues with trying to switch to another supplier
- a poor supply of gas or electricity

If you are still not happy and the issue has not been resolved after eight weeks, you can take your complaint to the Ombudsman Services: Energy using the details in Section 6.

The Ombudsman Services: Energy is an independent body which provides a free of charge service to customers who are in dispute with their energy supplier. It has the power to arbitrate between the customer and the energy supplier to resolve a complaint where both parties have reached deadlock.

Should you require advice on making a complaint, you can ask to see your supplier's complaint's procedure or contact Consumer Direct (see Section 6) for free, independent advice.

Compensation

You may be entitled to a small amount of compensation if your gas and electricity supply do not meet minimum standards – this sometimes covers power cuts, loss of gas supply, disputes about meter accuracy or appointments.

These are known as the Guaranteed Standards and there are standards for suppliers, distribution network operators and gas transporters. You can contact your supplier or Consumer Direct for more information.

6 Who can help? Your rights, general advice and complaints

Consumer Direct

- Gives independent advice, including on complaints and how to switch supplier. It can refer vulnerable consumers to other organisations that may be able to help
- Helpline: 08454 04 05 06 (08454 04 05 05 for Welsh speakers), Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm

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 their 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
- Tel. 0330 440 1624 or 01925 530263, Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm
- www.ombudsman-services.org/energy.html

Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland

- Gives general advice based on your personal situation
- Website gives you details of your local office
- Advice online: www.adviceguide.org.uk
- www.citizensadvice.org.uk or www.cas.org.uk (Scotland)

Consumer Focus

- Does not provide personal advice but its website has general advice on switching and how to compare the prices of different suppliers
- www.consumerfocus.org.uk

Dealing with debt

The Money Advice Trust

- Advice based on your personal situation
- Can help you create a financial statement if you have to go to court
- Tel. 020 7489 7796
- www.infohub.moneyadvicetrust.org

Consumer Credit Counselling Service

- Free, anonymous advice
- Helpline: 0800 138 1111, Monday–Friday, 8am–8pm
- www.cccs.co.uk

Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland

- See contact details above

Energy efficiency

- Your energy supplier has to give you information on how to save energy, if you ask for it, and has to have a phone service and publish information on its website. It also has to give you this information if you are finding it difficult to pay your bill and may want to find ways to reduce your bill in future

- You can also contact the Energy Saving Trust for free advice based on your personal situation and information about how to apply for energy efficiency grants. For online advice, visit its website. Or you can call 0800 512 012.

Support with financial hardship

Home Heat Helpline

- Information to help you pay your heating bills
- For example, information about help with payment, saving energy and special payment options
- Tel. 0800 33 6699, 9am–8pm, Monday–Friday, 10am–2pm, Saturdays

Your supplier

- Ask your supplier if it has special tariffs for people who are in financial hardship
- Some suppliers give a Warm Home Discount to specific customers, including people who get the guarantee element of Pension Credit
- If you are a British Gas, EDF Energy or npower customer, you may be able to get help from their trust funds. Contact your supplier directly to see if you are eligible

Help with saving energy

Warm Front Scheme (England only)

- Gives grants to improve heating and insulation in households that do not have central heating or are poorly insulated
- Only open to people on income-related benefits
- Tel. 0800 316 2805, Monday–Friday, 8am–6pm, Saturday, 9am–5pm

NEST (Wales only)

- Welsh Government's fuel poverty scheme
- Gives grants and information about ways to improve fuel efficiency
- Tel. 0800 512 012
- www.nestwales.org.uk

Energy Assistance Package (Scotland only)

- Gives grants and information about ways to improve fuel efficiency
- Tel. 0800 512 012

Warm Zones Scheme (parts of England and Scotland only)

- Gives financial support and practical advice to vulnerable people
- Website explains whether help is available in your area
- www.warmzones.co.uk

Your supplier

- Your supplier can give you information about saving energy and insulation
- If you are over 60, disabled, or chronically sick 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 worker is a representative of the supplier or distribution company
 - » bills in large print or Braille
 - » free moving of a prepayment meter if it can't easily be reached because of infirmity
 - » free reading of meter every quarter if they or no-one else in the property can do it
 - » sending a bill to a nominated representative of the consumer
- Customers in receipt of a means-tested benefit, for example income support, pension credit etc, who live alone or with someone under five and who are of pensionable age, disabled or chronically sick may also get a free yearly gas safety check

Your local authority

- Your local authority can help with saving energy and getting insulation for your home