



Energy in your home

This information is designed to help people who have recently moved to the UK to understand how energy at home works. Paying for your energy use might be very different from where you used to live, and the weather might be quite different too!

The below information provides some basics for how it works and some useful links to get you started.

If you need further information, detailed energy advice or help accessing grants, please get in touch with the Environment Centre. We run an energy advice line open to all residents in Southampton, Portsmouth and Hampshire: <https://environmentcentre.com/>

How the UK energy market works

In the UK, the electricity network is sometimes called the National Grid. There are several companies who own different parts of this network and make sure all the cables are working. It works the same way for the gas supply. There are private companies who own the pipes in different regions. In the Hampshire area, Southern Gas Networks (SGN) own and maintain the gas pipes and Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks own and maintain the electricity cables.

Paying for gas and electricity is done through separate private companies, and each household can choose which company they wish to pay their bills to. This company is called your energy supplier. Customers can choose which supplier to use. You can find out more about switching energy supplier here if this is something you wish to look into, for example if you want to check you are getting the best price, want better customer service or are interested in renewable energy. <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/energy/energy-supply/get-a-better-energy-deal/switching-energy-supplier/>

When you first move in to a property, there are several things you should do:

1. Take a meter reading. Often meters are located in a cupboard under the stairs, by the front door or on a wall outside in a white box, near the front door. If you live in a flat, it might be in a communal area with the flat numbers marked. It is easiest to take a photo of the meter so you have a record. This page tells you how to read the display: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/energy/energy-supply/your-energy-meter/how-to-read-your-energy-meter/> . If you have a digital display, you may need to press button 'B' to show the reading.
2. Find out who your current energy supplier is. If you aren't sure, you could ask your landlord if you rent or you can enter your address at this website: <https://www.findmysupplier.energy/> .
3. Set up an account. Call your energy supplier, or use their online form to set up an account in your name. This process will ask you for your name, address, meter reads and how you want to pay. Often, you can add more than one adult to the account which means you can add your partner if you have one. If you have a trusted friend or family member who can help with any translation, you can add them too.

4. Check your tariff. Not everyone pays the same amount for their gas and electricity. Your supplier might have a fixed contract which is cheaper. To find out, it is best to call them, do it early in the morning if you can as the wait time will be shorter then.



Taking a reading from an electricity meter

How to pay

There are several ways you can choose to pay for your energy. Different methods suit different people. The main ones are:

1. Direct Debit. This is where you agree with your supplier that they will take a set amount from your bank account every month. The advantage of this is having a fixed price every month. It suits households who have a reliable monthly pay and will have enough money in their bank account for the supplier to take the payment automatically. You can usually choose which day of the month it is taken.
2. Pay on receipt of bill. Your energy supplier will send you a bill by email or in the post either once a month or once every three months. You can then pay the full amount online, or over the phone. This suits households who know they will have the money to pay the bill when it comes through. This way you pay the exact amount after you have used it but the amount will vary during the year as most households use more energy in the winter to heat their homes.
3. Pre-pay or top up. This way of paying allows the household to put credit onto their energy account in advance. This suits households who have less reliable income or who are worried about getting into debt. This method is also useful for people who don't have a bank account. If there is no credit on the meter, the meter will cut off the energy supply. Credit can be topped up at local corner shops, or on an online account. It is often more expensive to pay this way, but a lot of people find it suits their way of budgeting as it allows them to pay in small amounts more frequently using cash if they find that easier. If you have this type of payment and want to change to a direct debit, you will need to contact your supplier. They might need to visit your home to change the meter. It's best to let your landlord know in advance if you are renting and would like to do that.

More information here: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/energy/energy-supply/>

Keeping warm and healthy in the winter

The UK may be colder than where you have lived before and so it's important to know how to keep warm at home. The World Health Organisation recommend keeping your main living area at 18°C and the bedroom slightly cooler. If you are older or have a health condition you might need it a bit warmer than this. Be careful not to set the temperature too high, because your energy bill will be very expensive!

There are different ways UK households are heated the main ones are listed below. There are other, less common methods such as heat pumps, log and coal burners which are not covered in this guide.

- Regular/system boilers. These are mostly fueled by gas to heat water which circulates around your radiators. You may find each radiator has a little knob with numbers on it which you can use to adjust the temperature in each room. The boiler also heats water in a hot water tank which might be in your loft or an upstairs cupboard. Make sure the hot water thermostat is set to 60°C. There is a risk of disease if it is lower, if it is high there is a higher risk of scalding and your bills will be expensive.
- Combi boilers. These also use gas to heat water for radiators but there is no hot water tank. Instead, water is heated on demand for example, when you turn on a hot tap.
- Storage heaters. These use electricity to store heat overnight and then release it into the room the next day. Homes with these heaters will often have a cheaper rate for electricity at night, this is called an Economy 7 tariff. Hot water is stored in an immersion heater, which can also be heated up overnight when the electricity is cheaper. More information can be found here: <https://environmentcentre.com/home-energy/storage-heaters/>
- Electric panel heaters. These might be called 'on-peak'. They might be fitted in small flats where demand for heating is low. This is because it is the most expensive way of heating a home. The heaters can be switched on whenever they are needed and will have a thermostat and a timer on each panel. Hot water will come from an immersion heater.

The cost of electricity is a lot more than gas per unit of energy, so if you have the option to use gas for heating and hot water, it is likely to cost less than using electricity.

To work your heating:

1. Find the controls for your heating system and check that you know how to use them. You can often find manuals online if you search for the make and type of system.
2. Set a heating programme. Every home takes a different length of time to warm up when the heating is switched on and to cool down after the heating is switched off. Work out these 'warm up' and 'cool down' times so that you can plan your heating programme around your daily routine. You do not need to have your heating on all day if no one will be at home.
3. If you have a hot water tank, make sure this is only heating when you need it. Most households only need 1-2hours a day for washing.
4. If you have an immersion heater for hot water, make sure this is only on when you need it as these are very expensive to run.



Image of a combi boiler

To make sure your boiler is working properly, you may want to book a heating engineer to carry out a boiler service. This is best done before the winter months, to reduce the risk of your boiler breaking when you need it most. You can find a list of local engineers at <https://www.buywithconfidence.gov.uk/> and search 'gas engineers/servicing'.

Keeping your home healthy

You may have noticed that it rains a lot in the UK! This makes the atmosphere inside and outside very humid which can lead to problems inside homes. Condensation and mould are common issues and can be a big health hazard. If you spot mould forming on your walls, clean it off as soon as you can. There are four things you can do to reduce condensation and mould inside your home:

- Make sure you heat your home in the winter
- Improving insulation, particularly in the loft and cavity walls
- Ventilate your home, particularly when cooking and drying laundry. Extractor fans in kitchens and bathrooms can work really well, or simply opening windows occasionally to let fresh air in and moisture out.
- Avoid creating too much moisture. For example from cooking, washing and drying laundry inside.

You can find more information here: <https://energysavingtrust.org.uk/advice/fixing-damp-and-condensation/>

It has become quite popular recently to have log burners in homes. You might have one already, or be thinking about installing one. Log burners can create a lot of pollution inside and outside your home, and might not be cheaper than using central heating. If you do have one, it is very important that you ventilate your home regularly and use wood that has had several years to dry out (season). You can find out more here: <https://environmentcentre.com/blog-articles/burning-wood-to-keep-warm-the-facts-and-fiction/>



Wood burning stoves cause harmful air pollution

Extra help for people who might be more vulnerable

There is extra support available for people who need it:

- Priority Services Register. If you have young children, a disability or are over 65, you may be able to be added to this register for extra support. You can do this on the Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks website. More information is available here: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/energy/energy-supply/get-help-paying-your-bills/getting-extra-support-from-your-energy-supplier/> And you can register here: <https://www.ssen.co.uk/power-cuts-emergencies/priority-services/>
- Water Bill discount. Southern Water offer discounts on bills for certain people who are struggling to pay or have a medical condition which means they need to use more water than average. More information is available on their website: <https://www.southernwater.co.uk/account/what-if-i-can-t-pay-my-bill>
- The government offer a scheme which can help people on low incomes who live in homes with a poor energy efficiency. This is called ECO. There is more information here: <https://eco4.org.uk/> . The scheme itself is not a Public Fund for immigration purposes, however it is easier to access for people on means-tested benefits.

Funding does change on a regular basis and may be different depending on where you live. Not every scheme requires means-tested benefits so if you are one a low income and are struggling to stay warm at home, please call local charity, the Environment Centre to find out if you are eligible: 0800 804 8601

Making improvements to your home

Making improvements to your home can be a really good investment, and save you money in the long term. There are several things you can do to make improvements, some will be cheaper than others.

- LED lightbulbs are modern, energy efficient bulbs which use very little electricity. You can buy them in supermarkets and they last a very long time. If you think your light bulbs are quite old, it is worth replacing them as LEDs are so much cheaper to run.
- Most houses have an Energy Performance Certificate. One has to be carried out when a house is sold or let to different tenants. You can search for yours online here: <https://www.gov.uk/find-energy-certificate> . It will give your home a rating from A (the best) to G (the worst) and will suggest things that can be done to improve the rating. The certificates only need updating every 10 years so it might be that some things have been done since the certificate was written. The prices and saving amounts are also likely to be out of date, however it gives a good place to start when deciding what improvements you could make.
- If you are not on a low income and would like to improve the energy efficiency of your home, you can arrange quotes yourself. It is recommended to use a trusted website to search for installers, so that you know they are registered professionals. You can use Buy With Confidence: <https://www.buywithconfidence.gov.uk/> or Trustmark: <https://www.trustmark.org.uk/> . It is best to get at least two quotes from different installers so that you can compare value for money and choose someone you can trust.
It is worth noting that some tradesmen will not want to take their shoes off inside your home. You might want to put some old sheets or newspaper down before they visit if you are worried about this.
- If you are renting your home, it is your landlord's responsibility to make improvements. You should talk to them first of all if you think some work needs doing in your home. There are minimum standards that landlords are required to meet before they can let the property, such as having an Energy Performance Certificate of at least an E. If you are unsure if your home meets this, talk to your landlord to start with, and you can contact your local council if the issue is not resolved.