

Five Simple Steps to Managing your Energy Bills

Helping you afford to keep warm



Gweithredu dros Gartrefi Cynnes
Action for Warm Homes



Step One - Try not to panic

You have bills from your energy supplier you can't pay, debts building up and you're scared about the lights going out.

Easier said than done, but try not to panic.

Fuel poverty can affect anyone. Last year, 23% of households in Wales were living in fuel poverty, and over 34,000 electricity customers and 29,000 gas customers were in debt to their supplier.

Suppliers and other organisations are able to help people who are struggling to pay their bills. This leaflet will help you work out how to manage your bills, and how to keep energy costs down.

First, check your meter readings are correct

Unless you have a prepayment meter, your energy bills may be estimated, but the estimates might not always be that accurate. Without an up-to-date meter reading, suppliers have to estimate how much energy they think you are likely to have used. This may mean you are being over or under-charged.

Read your electricity meter (and gas meter if you have one) and let your supplier(s) know the

readings. If you don't know how to read your meter or can't get to it, contact your supplier and ask them to send somebody out to read it. When you have your new readings, ask for an updated bill so you know exactly how much you owe your supplier.

Next, arrange affordable repayments

If you are in debt, speak to your supplier in the first instance to discuss a suitable repayment arrangement. Otherwise, contact an independent advice service who can help you work out how much you can afford, and the most suitable way to repay this. They can also look at other options like getting help from a trust fund, claiming benefits, or applying for other help, and they may be able to speak to your supplier(s) on your behalf. See the back page for a list of some organisations that you can contact for advice.

When you or the advice agency contacts your energy supplier(s) to arrange your repayments, the supplier must take into account your individual circumstances when agreeing any repayment.

In addition, if the supplier(s) knows you are having payment difficulties, they must offer you:

- the option to have your payments taken directly from your means-tested benefits, if you receive them. This is known as Fuel Direct.
- the opportunity to pay regular instalments, without going on a prepayment meter
- the opportunity to have a prepayment meter installed

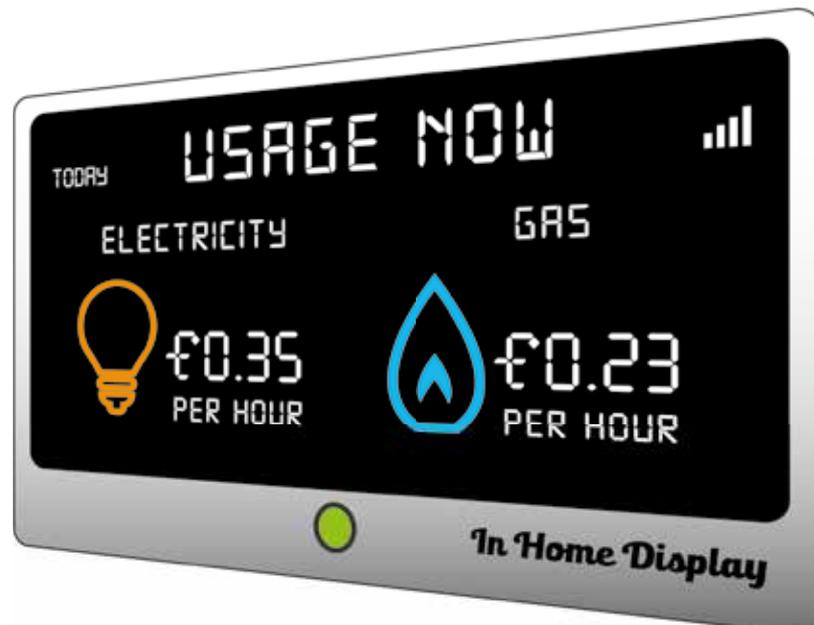
Step Two - Bringing your energy usage down

Once you have taken the first steps to deal with any fuel debt, it is time to think about whether you can reduce your bills for the long term.

The easiest way to do this is through reducing the amount of energy you use, if you are using more than you need to.

Energy efficient heating and insulation

You can bring bills down by improving the insulation of your home and having an efficient heating system. The Welsh Government scheme, Nest, offers free heating and insulation to households that qualify. If you don't qualify, they will be able to offer you advice and tell you about any other schemes they are aware of which might be able to help. See the last page for their contact details.



Smart meters

Every household in Great Britain will be offered a smart meter between now and 2020. They work in prepayment and credit mode, and will send your meter readings directly to your supplier. This means an end to estimated bills. Smart meters will also come with an in-home display, allowing you to see how much energy you are using, and how much it is costing you in pounds and pence. It will help you to work out which appliances in your home use a lot of energy and which are less expensive to run.

You can contact your supplier to request a smart meter or you can wait until they contact you. Although all homes should be able to receive a smart meter by 2020, some homes will not be able to have them yet.



Low cost/no cost tips

- Close your curtains at night to keep the heat in
- Set your thermostat at the minimum you need to keep a healthy level of warmth (18-21°C in most cases) and set the timer so that the boiler only comes on when you need the heating
- If you have thermostatic radiator valves, adjust these to keep the rooms you use warmer than any rooms you don't use
- Block up any cracks around windows and doors, if draughts are coming through
- Put lids on saucepans when cooking, so food cooks faster on a lower heat
- Only boil the amount of water you need in the kettle
- Dry clothes on a line outside if you can, rather than using a tumble dryer

Be efficient but stay warm

Although fuel debt can be concerning, it is important you don't let your house get too cold as this can affect your health. Older people, people with chronic health conditions and babies and young children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the cold. The World Health Organisation recommends that rooms are kept at 18-21°C, depending on health conditions.



Step Three - Reducing your bills

You may be able to reduce your bills, even without reducing the energy you use.

Switching supplier and tariff

You can save money simply by switching supplier or tariff.

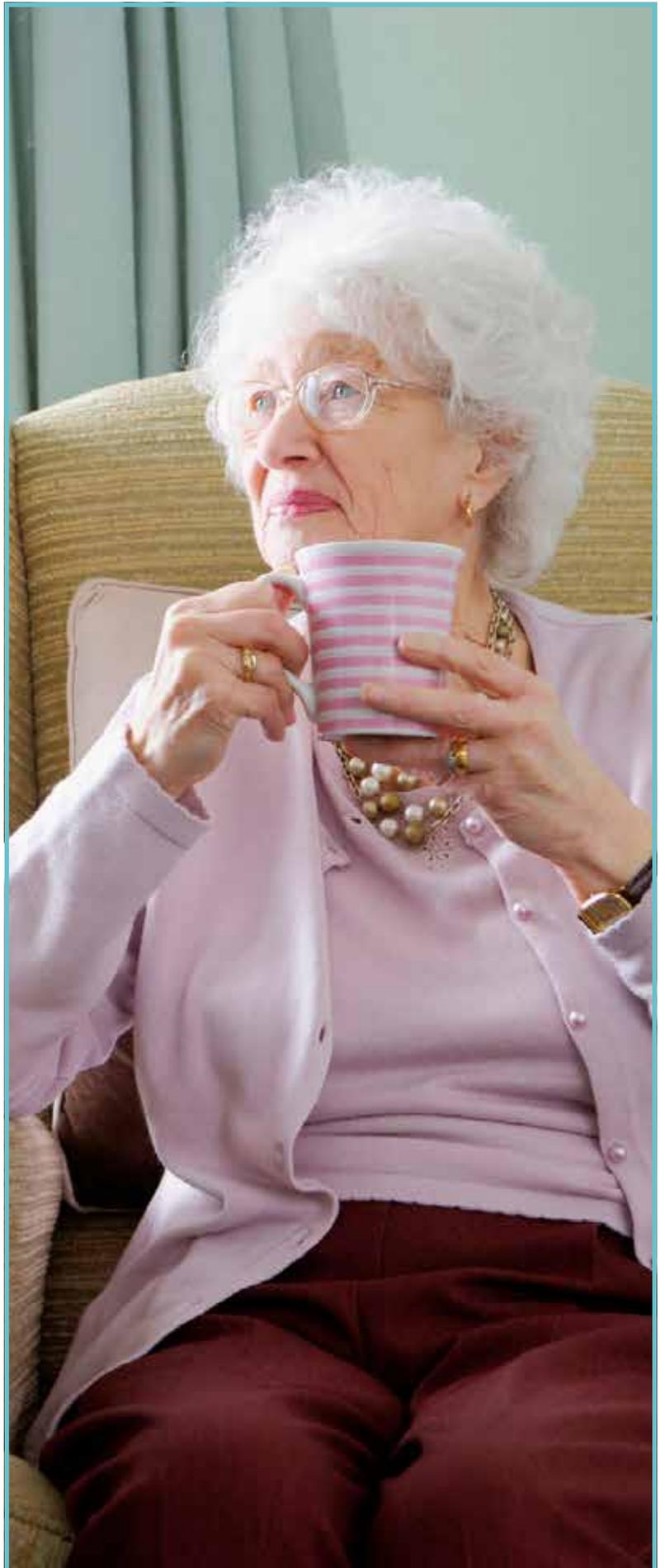
Contact your supplier to discuss cheaper tariffs, or alternatively there are a number of different recommended websites which can help you work out if you can save money by switching, one of which is <https://energycompare.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

Please note: If you have a credit meter and have been in debt to your supplier for more than 28 days, in most cases you will not be allowed to switch supplier until you have paid this off. However you may still be able to reduce your bills by switching to a different tariff with the same supplier

If you have a prepayment meter, you can switch supplier unless you owe more than £500 for gas and £500 for electricity.

Changing payment method

The way in which you pay for your energy may make it more expensive. In general, paying by direct debit is usually cheapest, and paying a quarterly bill or using a prepayment meter is usually the most expensive method. However, it is important that the payment method you use suits your circumstances.



Step Four - Financial help

Warm Home Discount Scheme

This will give you £140 off your electricity bill. Check with your electricity supplier to see if you are eligible.

There are 2 ways to qualify for the Warm Home Discount Scheme:

- you get the Guarantee Credit element of Pension Credit - known as the 'core group'
- you're on a low income and meet your energy supplier's criteria for the scheme - known as the 'broader group'

How you apply for the Warm Home Discount Scheme depends on how you qualify for the discount.

Please note that these schemes are not open all year round.

Energy supplier support

Your energy supplier may provide financial support through a trust fund to help you clear your gas and electricity debt. Contact your energy supplier or get advice from a debt advisor on the support available.



Step Five - Further help

Priority Services Register

The Priority Services Register offers free services to people who are of pensionable age, are registered disabled, have a long-term medical condition, a hearing or visual impairment, or are in a vulnerable situation. Help can include having meters moved, advance notice and priority reconnection if your supply will be interrupted and annual gas safety checks. Contact your supplier(s) to register.

Complaints and disputed bills

In the first instance, any issues you have should be taken up with your energy supplier. However, if they do not resolve the issue you have the right to contact the Energy Ombudsman (telephone 0330 440 1624 / textrelay 0330 440 1600).

Increasing your income

Many people are not claiming all the benefits which they are entitled to. Claiming the right benefits will not only increase your income but can also make you eligible for further help such as free insulation, Cold Weather Payments and the Winter Fuel Payment.

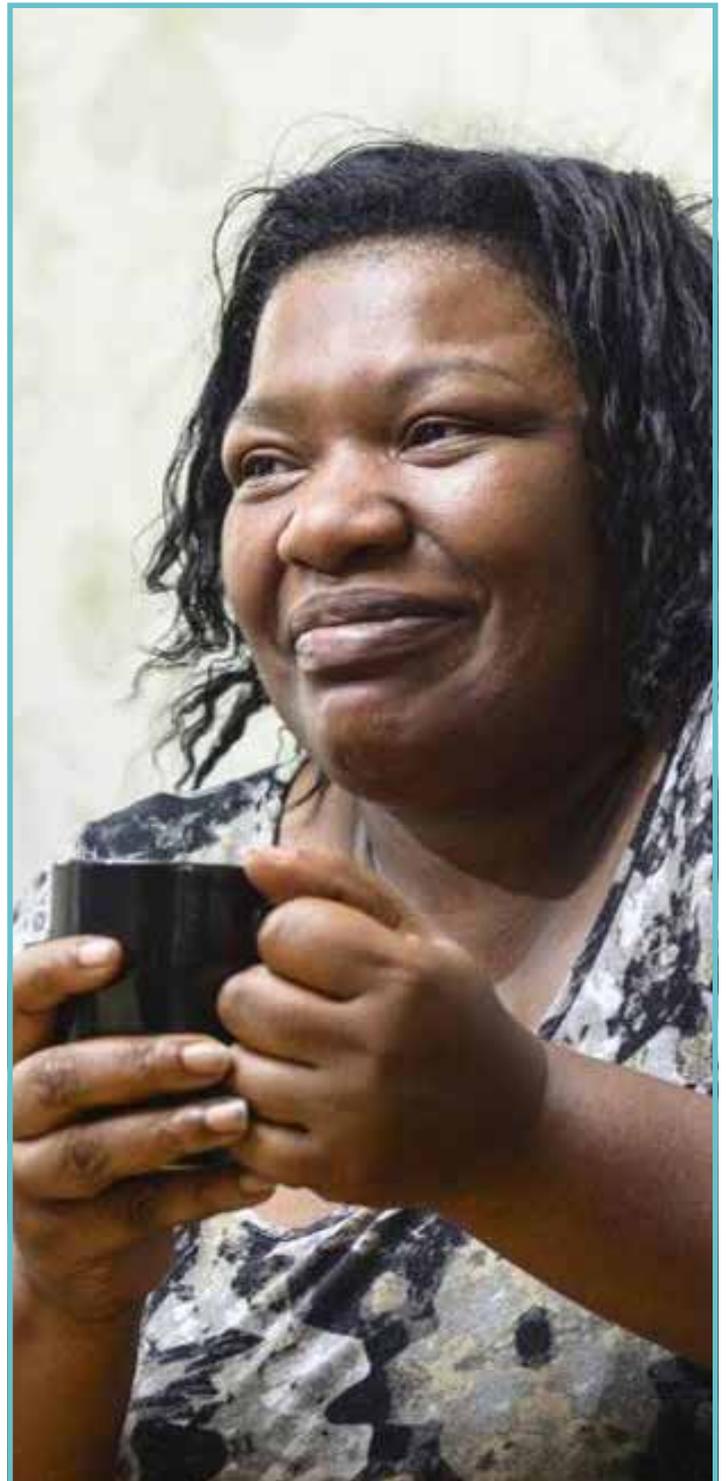
Your supplier(s), the Department of Work and Pensions and a number of voluntary organisations can help you ensure you are claiming everything you are entitled

Disconnection

Very few households are disconnected by their supplier for fuel debt. In the majority of cases, customers agree repayment methods or have a prepayment meter fitted before disconnection procedures begin, so it is very important to work with your supplier if you have a fuel debt. Suppliers will generally

not disconnect customers of a pensionable age, or who are disabled or chronically sick between 1 October and 31 March.

Energy companies are expected to offer a range of help to customers experiencing difficulties as an alternative to disconnection. Contact your supplier to find out what help they can offer.



For further help, contact:

Citizens Advice - advice line

0344 77 20 20

(text relay 03444 11 445)

www.citizensadvice.org.uk/debt-and-money

National Debtline

0808 808 4000 (free)

www.nationaldebtline.org

Nest Wales

0808 808 22 44 (free)

www.nestwales.org.uk



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Action for Warm Homes*

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energy efficiency charity



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