

Factsheet 69 September 2009

Water advice

About this factsheet

This factsheet offers tips on saving water at home and reducing water bills. It provides information on how to change your method of payment by switching to a meter; the benefits of registering on the Vulnerable Persons Register; and how you can get help with the costs of water if you are eligible for the Vulnerable Groups Scheme.

The information given in this factsheet is applicable in England. Different rules may apply in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Readers in these nations should contact their respective national Age Concern organisation for information specific to where they live – see section 11 for details.

For details of how to order other Age Concern factsheets and information materials go to section 11.

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1 Introduction

Saving water at home will help the environment and may help you to reduce your bills if you are using a water meter.

You can only be supplied by your regional water company. You cannot change to another water supplier because the water industry is not deregulated in the same way as the gas and electricity industries. If you are billed on rateable value of your home your charges are fixed and there is no possibility of reducing them but you may be able to save on bills by installing a meter and using less water.

2 Tips for saving water

There are many ways to save water at home, including the following.

- Fix dripping taps – they can waste up to 4 litres of water a day.
- Take showers instead of baths – showers use 2–3 times less water than a bath (except for power showers which can use more water than a bath in less than 5 minutes).
- Keep a bottle or jug of water in the fridge instead of running tap water until it gets cold (it should be covered and kept no longer than a day).
- Don't leave the water running while brushing your teeth or shaving; this can waste almost 9 litres a minute.
- Wash your vegetables in a bowl rather than under running water.
- Water your garden in the early morning or evening as it will not evaporate so quickly; it is also better to water thoroughly once a week than lightly but more frequently; avoid using sprinklers; install a water butt to collect rainwater for your garden – it's better for the garden than tap water.
- Fit a Hippo device (also known as a Save a Flush) – it can save up to 3 litres of water with every flush. Your water company may be able to supply them free.
- Don't use your washing machine or dishwasher on half-load programme – a full load uses less water than two half loads (the average wash uses about 95 litres of water).

- Use only the minimum water required while boiling water in saucepans or kettles – you will save energy as well as water.
- Make sure your water pipes are lagged in time for winter – burst water pipes can cause serious damage, as well as wasting water.

A little knowledge about plumbing can save you time and money when you are faced with a burst pipe or a leak. The most important thing to know is where your stop tap (stopcock) is located. If you want to carry out any repairs, it must be turned off. If a cistern or pipe bursts you will need to drain the system by running the cold tap. The stop tap is usually located in the kitchen under the sink. Your stop tap can also seize up quickly from lack of use; it is worth making sure that it is working smoothly by turning it from time to time. If the stop tap is stuck or leaking, have it repaired by a plumber.

For tips on how to find a reputable tradesman look at the TrustMark website (see section 10).

3 **Water shortage**

Water shortage in your area can lead to water companies taking measures to ensure that the supplies do not run out. There could be different levels of restrictions depending on how severe the water shortage is. These may include:

- hosepipe/sprinkler bans
- drought orders that give a water company the power to ban all the non-essential use
- drought permits that allow the companies to take water temporarily from other sources such as rivers and groundwater (this may have a damaging effect on the environment)
- an emergency drought order that would allow the water companies to restrict the use of water in any way deemed necessary, which in practice often means cutting off water supply to homes and setting up standpipes in streets.

Saving water will help you to save money, conserve limited resources and prevent introduction of severe emergency drought orders; see the water saving tips above in section 2.

For more information and update reports on drought see the Environment Agency website: www.environment-agency.gov.uk.

4 Changing your method of payment

The Consumer Council for Water (see section 10) has a calculator that will help you estimate if you can cut down your bills by switching to a meter. The calculation is based on national average consumption figures and the information provided by you. Your water company should be able to provide you with more guidance on obtaining a water meter but they can refuse to fit one if it is too expensive or difficult to do so.

All meters are installed free of charge for household customers. You can revert to unmeasured charging within one year of the date of installation. This only applies to the person who applied for the meter, not to any subsequent occupiers of the property, who must keep the meter previously installed.

It may be beneficial for you to switch to a meter if:

- you use very little water
- your property has a high rateable value
- you want to be in control of how much water you pay for.

The drawbacks of having a meter installed might include:

- the inconvenience of having your meter read
- if you lose water through leakage after the meter is installed you will have to pay for it (The water company may be willing to adjust their charges to make allowance for the first leak after the meter is installed, providing you report and repair it quickly. Some water companies offer a free leak detection service to domestic consumers.)
- You will not know for sure how much your annual bill is going to be.

Sometimes it is impractical or too expensive for the water company to fit a meter because, for example, the work would involve separating the pipe work in places such as a tower block. In cases like this the company can refuse to install a meter but you can still ask for an assessed charge bill.

Different water companies calculate the charge in different ways: it could be based on the number of occupants, the type of property, the number of bedrooms, or the average household charge. Once you know what the charge is, you will need to compare it with your current bill to see if you can save money. Contact your water company for more information.

5 **Water arrears**

Water companies cannot disconnect you for water arrears. They will have to take action in a county court to recover the debt. If you are in rented property you may be liable to pay water charges as part of your rent – it is not covered by Housing Benefit. If you are not able to pay your water charge element, you will be in rent arrears and your landlord may start eviction proceedings.

All companies have provisions, such as budget schemes, to help people who have difficulty paying their bills. If you are getting into rent arrears contact your water company to make arrangements to pay off your water charges.

6 **Help from charitable trusts**

Some water companies set up charitable trusts to help with water debts or the other needs of vulnerable clients. Help is discretionary and individual companies set their own eligibility criteria. Contact your water company or local advice agency such as Age Concern or Citizens Advice Bureau for information.

7 **Vulnerable Groups Scheme (WaterSure)**

Under the Vulnerable Groups Scheme you may be able to get help with the cost of your water supply. The scheme is open to people who have water meters and use a high volume of water because of certain medical conditions or because they have three or more children under the age of 19 and in full-time education living in the property, and are receiving income-related benefits including:

- Council Tax Benefit
- Housing Benefit
- Income Support

- income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Working Tax Credit
- Child Tax Credit (except families in receipt of the family element only)
- Pension Credit
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance.

You will need to provide evidence that you meet the criteria. Evidence could include a copy of the award of qualifying benefit, information on the medical condition, its treatment, etc.

The scheme is not available to customers who use a swimming pool, sprinkler system or non hand-held garden-watering device.

For more information and the list of qualifying medical conditions contact your water company or check with Ofwat or the Consumer Council for Water (see section 10).

8 **Water resale**

If you buy your water or sewerage services from another person or company (eg your landlord) instead of directly from a water or sewerage company you are protected by the rules about maximum water resale.

Anyone reselling water or sewerage services should charge no more than the amount they are charged by the water company, plus a reasonable administration charge. Maintenance costs for water or sewerage pipework are not included in the resale price. These costs are usually recovered through the tenant's rent or by separate agreement. For more information, check with Ofwat or the Consumer Council for Water (see section 10).

9 **Vulnerable Persons Register**

Water companies keep a register of customers who are disabled, chronically sick or of pensionable age to ensure they're not disadvantaged. Customers who are on the register may be offered:

- 'talking' bills on tape or in Braille
- sending bills to a relative or friend

- a unique password that is only known by the customer and a member of staff who needs to make a visit
- for their meter to be re-sited (there might be a charge for this) or a meter reading service.

Contact your water company for more information.

10 Useful organisations

● **Citizens Advice Bureau**

National network of free advice centres. Depending on available resources may offer benefits check and help filling forms.

Tel: 020 7833 2181 (for local contact details only – not telephone advice)

Website: www.adviceguide.org.uk

● **Consumer Council for Water**

The Consumer Council for Water is the independent voice for customers of the water and sewerage companies. If you have a problem with your water company, take up the complaint with them. If you are not satisfied with the way they deal with your complaint, you can go to your local Consumer Council for Water. Contact details of local offices can be obtained from Ofwat or from Consumer Council for Water.

Tel: 0845 039 2837 or 0121 345 1000

Textphone: 0121 345 1044

Website: www.ccwater.org.uk

● **Environment Agency**

For information and update reports on drought.

Website: www.environment-agency.gov.uk

● **Office of Water Services (Ofwat)**

Ofwat is the independent regulatory body set up to monitor and regulate the activities of the water companies.

Tel: 0121 625 1300

Website: www.ofwat.gov.uk

● **TrustMark**

The TrustMark website offers assistance in finding builders, plumbers, electricians, roofers and other firms that have been awarded the TrustMark by approved scheme operators who comply with government-endorsed standards.

Tel: 01344 630 804

Website: www.trustmark.org.uk.

11 **Further information about Age Concern**

Visit the Age Concern website, www.ageconcern.org.uk, or call our national Information Line on 0800 00 99 66 (free call) if you would like:

- to order copies of any of the Age Concern information materials mentioned in this factsheet
- to request information in large print
- further information about our full range of information products
- contact details for your nearest local Age Concern.

Books from Age Concern

Age Concern publishes a wide range of books for older people and those who care for and work with them. The following title may be of particular interest:

Your rights to money benefits 2009/10. All you need to know about the full range of benefits for the over 60s. £5.99 (available June 2009)

To order this book, or to view our full range of books, please visit our website www.ageconcern.org.uk/bookshop or call our book order line 0870 442 2120.

Age Concern and Help the Aged

Age Concern England and Help the Aged have joined together to form Age UK, a single charity dedicated to improving the lives of older people.

Age Concern and Help the Aged across the UK

To find out more about Age Concern and Help the Aged's work in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, contact:

Age Concern Northern Ireland
Tel: 028 9032 5055
Website: www.ageconcernni.org

Scottish Helpline for Older People (Age Concern Scotland)
Tel: 0845 125 9732
Websites: www.olderpeoplescotland.org.uk
www.ageconcernscotland.org.uk

Age Concern Cymru & Help the Aged in Wales
Tel: 029 2043 1555
Website: www.accymru.org.uk

Support our work

Age Concern is the largest provider of services to older people in the UK after the NHS. We make a difference to the lives of thousands of older people through local resources such as our befriending schemes, day centres and lunch clubs; by distributing free information materials; and through our national freephone helpline – the Age Concern Information Line 0800 00 99 66.

If you would like to support our work by making a donation please call Supporter Services on 020 8765 7527 (national call rate, Monday to Friday 9.15am–5pm) or visit www.ageconcern.org.uk

Legal statement

Age Concern England (charity number 261794) has merged with Help the Aged (charity number 272786) to form Age UK, a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England: registered office address 207-221 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9UZ, company number 6825798, registered charity number 1128267.

Age Concern and Help the Aged are brands of Age UK. The three national Age Concerns in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have also merged with Help the Aged in these nations to form three registered charities: Age Scotland, Age Northern Ireland, Age Cymru.

Disclaimer and copyright information

This guide is not a comprehensive statement of the law in this subject and Age Concern and Help the Aged cannot give individual legal or financial advice. Some rules may have changed since the publication of this guide. If you have any queries that this guide does not answer, seek further advice from one of the organisations suggested.

Please note that the inclusion of named agencies, companies, products, services or publications in this factsheet does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement by Age Concern and Help the Aged. While every effort is made to ensure accuracy, Age Concern and Help the Aged cannot be held responsible for errors or omissions.

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