Factsheet 69

Water advice

May 2016

About this factsheet

This factsheet offers tips on saving water at home and reducing water bills.

It provides information on switching to a meter and how you can get help with the costs of water if you are eligible for the WaterSure Scheme.

The information in this factsheet is applicable in England and Wales. If you are in Scotland or Northern Ireland, please contact Age Scotland or Age NI for their version of this factsheet.

Contact details for all the organisations mentioned in this factsheet can be found in the Useful Organisations section.

Contents

1 Introduction	3
2 Tips for saving water	3
3 Water meters	4
4 Compulsory metering	5
5 Special discount and tariff schemes	5
6 Water arrears	6
7 WaterSure	6
8 Help from charitable trusts	7
9 Water resale	7
10 Additional support	7
11 Surface water drainage	8
12 Water shortage	8
Useful organisations	9
Age UK	10
Support our work	10

1 Introduction

Saving water at home helps the environment and may help reduce your bills if you use a water meter.

You can only be supplied by your regional water company. You cannot change to another water supplier as 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 water charges are fixed but you may be able to save on bills by installing a meter and using less water, or by joining certain schemes or tariffs.

2 Tips for saving water

There are many ways to save water at home, including:

- Fix dripping taps – they can waste as much as 15 litres of water a day.
- Take showers instead of baths - a 5 minute shower uses half as much water as a bath.
- 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 - wastes about 6 litres a minute.
- Wash 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.
- Water garden thoroughly once a week rather than more frequently; avoid sprinklers.
- Install a water butt to collect rainwater for your garden – it's better for the garden than tap water.
- Install a displacement device in your cistern, such as a Hippo or a Save-a-flush, saves as much as 3 litres of water with every flush. Your water company may supply them for free.
- Do not use washing machine or dishwasher on half-load – full loads use less water than two half loads (about 50 litres of water per cycle).
- Use minimum water when boiling in saucepans or kettles – saving energy as well as water.
- Ensure water pipes are lagged in time for winter – burst water pipes cause serious damage and waste water. Lagging pipes reduces heat loss, saving money on energy bills.
- Know where your stop tap (stopcock) is located. If any repairs are needed, it must be turned off.
- If a cistern or pipe bursts you must drain the system by running the cold tap. If the stop tap is stuck or leaking, have it repaired by a plumber.

3 Water meters

The Consumer Council for Water website has a calculator that estimates if you can cut your water bills by switching to a meter. The calculation is based on national average consumption figures and information provided by you. Your water company should be able to provide you with guidance on obtaining a water meter.

Meters are installed free of charge for household customers. Tenants with a fixed term tenancy of less than six months must ask their landlord's permission. Tenants with a fixed term tenancy of six months or more have the right to have a water meter fitted but they may need their landlord's permission to have an internal meter fitted, especially if plumbing has to be altered.

Note
You can revert to unmeasured charging within one year of the date of installation (but there are exceptions – see section 4). This only applies to who applied for the meter, not to subsequent occupiers of the property, who must keep a meter previously installed.

It may be beneficial to switch to a meter if:

- you use very little water – for example, you are a small or single occupancy household or are actively water conscious
- your property has a high rateable value
- you want to be in control of how much water you pay for.

Drawbacks of having a meter installed include:

- you have to arrange for your meter to be read (although water meters can be installed so they can be read from outside your home)
- you do not know in advance how much your annual bill is going to be, as it varies depending on how much water you use in the year
- if you lose water through a leak after a meter is installed, you usually have to pay for it.

Note
Water companies sometimes offer leak detection services to domestic consumers when installing a water meter. This can be free or at your expense. Leaks that can be repaired without excavation are repaired free of charge. You are charged for subsequent repairs. The water company might adjust charges to allow for a first leak after a meter is installed, providing you report and repair it quickly.

Sometimes it is impractical or too expensive for a water company to fit a meter because, for example, the work involves separating the pipe work in a tower block. A company can refuse to install a meter but you can ask for an assessed charge bill.

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

Note
You will not be offered an assessed charge unless you apply for a meter.

4 Compulsory metering

Water companies are legally entitled to install meters in areas that have been declared as having low water supply. In these areas, you may have no choice on how you are charged and you can be forced to have a water meter installed.

Your water company can also insist you have a water meter installed if you have a swimming pool, a power shower, a large bath or use a garden sprinkler.

5 Special discount and tariff schemes

Water companies offer a variety of discount schemes for certain customers. Some, such as Bristol Water and Wessex Water, offer 20 per cent discounts from your water bill if you receive Pension Credit.

Other water companies have introduced social tariffs which offer reduced bills to customers who would otherwise struggle to pay. Schemes differ in terms of who is eligible and the assistance is provided. The Consumer Council for Water website includes details of all schemes currently available and how to apply in England and Wales. Click on the tab titled *Lower bills for customers struggling to pay* for more information.

The Welsh Water HelpU scheme can help with water bills, if you have a low household income. If you get help through the scheme, your water bill is capped. This means you do not pay more than a set amount for the year. The amount your bill is capped at depends on your household's annual income: See the Welsh Water website for more information.

6 Water arrears

Water companies are not allowed to disconnect you for water arrears. Instead, they have to take court action to recover the debt. If you are struggling to pay your water bill, contact your water company to make arrangements initially. Each water company has a code of practice for customers owing money and can provide you with a copy.

They should have provision, such as budget schemes and hardship funds, to help if you have difficulty paying your bill. They may have a special scheme to help you clear your debt (section 6).

If you are a tenant make sure you are charged the right amount of money for your water (section 8).

If you are in arrears and claiming certain benefits such as Pension Credit, you may be able to arrange to have regular payments from your benefits paid directly to your water company.

If you live in rented property you may be liable to pay water charges as part of your rent. This 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 can start eviction proceedings.

If you are not claiming any benefits but are struggling financially, get a benefits check. This is a calculation that tells you whether you are entitled to benefits such as Pension Credit, Attendance Allowance, or Personal Independence Payment. Contact Age UK Advice or your local Age UK to get a benefit check.

7 WaterSure

WaterSure schemes offer help with the cost of your water supply. The scheme is open if you have a water meter and either someone in your household has a medical condition that causes significant extra water use, or having three or more children under the age of 19 in full-time education living with you, and you receive certain benefits including:

- Universal Credit
- Housing Benefit
- Income Support
- income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Working Tax Credit
- Child Tax Credit (except if you only receive the family element)
- Pension Credit
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance.

You need to provide evidence that you meet the criteria. Evidence includes a copy of the award letter of a qualifying benefit, information on your medical condition and treatment, etc.

If you qualify for WaterSure, your bill is capped and you pay no more than the average household bill for your company, even if you use more.

The scheme is not available if you have 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 Ofwat or the Consumer Council for Water.

8 Help from charitable trusts

Some water companies have charitable trusts if you are in difficult circumstances to provide help with water debts or other household expenses such as bills and essential household items.

Help is discretionary and trusts set their own eligibility criteria. Contact your water company or local Age UK or Citizens Advice for information.

9 Water resale

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

Anyone reselling water or sewerage services should not charge 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 this.

Costs are usually recovered through the tenant's rent or by separate agreement.

10 Additional support

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 can be offered:

- 'talking' bills on tape or in Braille
- bills sent to a relative or friend
- special arrangements to contact you in an emergency
- unique password known by you and a staff member who needs to visit
- meter to be re-sited (there may be a charge) or meter reading service.

Contact your water company for more information.

11 Surface water drainage

Surface water is the rainwater that drains from a property into a sewer. The water company collects and treats this water and charges customers for the service.

If rainwater does not drain from your property into a public sewer, because you have a soakaway, you may be entitled to a surface water drainage rebate. You must claim this from your water company and provide evidence.

If you are awarded a rebate it applies from the beginning of the financial year in which you claim. Your rebate is not backdated unless you can show the company knew your property was not connected to the public sewer.

12 Water shortage

Water shortage in your area can lead to water companies taking measures to ensure supplies do not run out. Companies may impose different levels of restrictions depending on the severity of the shortage.

These include:

- hosepipe/sprinkler bans
- drought orders giving a water company the power to ban all the non-essential use
- drought permits allowing companies to take water temporarily from other sources such as rivers and groundwater
- emergency drought order allowing companies to restrict water use in any way deemed necessary, which often means cutting off water supply to homes and setting up standpipes in streets.

Saving water helps you to save money, conserve limited resources and prevent introduction of severe emergency drought orders.

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

Useful organisations

Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)
England or Wales go to www.citizensadvice.org.uk
In England telephone 0344 411 1444
In Wales telephone 0344 477 2020

National network of advice centres offering free, confidential, independent advice, face to face or by telephone.

Consumer Council for Water
www.ccwater.org.uk
Telephone 0300 034 2222 (England) Mon-Fri 08.30-17.00
Telephone 0300 034 3333 (Wales) Mon-Fri 08.30-17.00

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, complain to 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.

Environment Agency
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/environment-agency

For information and update reports on drought and flooding.

Office of Water Services (Ofwat)
www.ofwat.gov.uk
Telephone 0121 644 7500

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

TrustMark
www.trustmark.org.uk
Telephone 0333 555 1234 Mon-Thurs 09.00-17.30, Fri 09.00-17.00

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

Welsh Water
www.dwrcymru.com
Telephone 0800 052 0145 Mon - Fri 08.00-20.00, Sat 08.30-13.30

Not-for-profit water company providing water services to consumers across Wales.

Age UK

Age UK provides advice and information for people in later life through our Age UK Advice line, publications and online. Call Age UK Advice to find out whether there is a local Age UK near you, and to order free copies of our information guides and factsheets.

Age UK Advice
www.ageuk.org.uk
0800 169 65 65
Lines are open seven days a week from 8.00am to 7.00pm

In Wales contact

Age Cymru
www.agecymru.org.uk
0800 022 3444

In Northern Ireland, contact

Age NI
www.ageni.org
0808 808 7575

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland by calling

Silver Line Scotland
www.agescotland.org.uk
0800 470 8090
(This is a partnership between The Silver Line and Age Scotland)

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The evidence sources used to create this factsheet are available on request. Contact *resources@ageuk.org.uk*

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