

Factsheet 69

Water advice

May 2019

About this factsheet

This factsheet offers tips on reducing water bills and how to save water.

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 correct for the period May 2019 to April 2020.

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 any organisation mentioned in this factsheet can be found in the *Useful organisations* section.

Contents

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

1 Introduction

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

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. You may be able to save on bills by opting to have a free meter installed or by joining certain schemes or tariffs. You can save money on water in ways other than simply restricting your use of water.

2 Special discount and tariff schemes

Water companies offer a variety of discount schemes for certain customers. Bristol Water and Wessex Water offer 20 per cent discounts from your water bill if you receive Pension Credit (PC). United Utilities can limit bills to customers receiving PC and struggling to pay at £255 if you are single or £360 if you are a couple. Northumbrian Water plans to introduce a scheme to provide lower bills to customers who receive PC.

Other water companies have 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 that 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 *Help with my bill* for more information.

The Welsh Water HelpU scheme can help with water bills, if you have a low household income of less than £15,000 per annum and receive a means-tested benefit. 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.

3 Water arrears

Water companies are not allowed to disconnect you for water arrears. Instead, they may take court action to recover the debt. It can also harm your credit rating if you fall behind with payments. If you are struggling to pay your water bill, contact your water company to see how they can help. Each water company has a code of practice for customers owing money and can provide you with a copy.

Many offer budget schemes and hardship funds, which can help you clear your debt (see section 5). If you are a tenant, make sure you are charged the right amount of money for your water (see section 6).

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 or Universal Credit. 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 looks at 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. In Wales, contact Age Cymru Advice or your local Age Cymru.

4 WaterSure

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

You must also receive at least one of the following benefits:

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

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 signed by your GP, etc.

If you qualify for WaterSure, your bill is capped and you pay no more than the average household bill for your company (and sometimes less), even if you use more. You must reapply and supply evidence every year.

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 the Consumer Council for Water.

5 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, local Age UK or Age Cymru, or Citizens Advice for information.

6 Water resale

If you buy water or sewerage services from another person or company, for example, 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.

7 Additional support

Water companies keep a Priority Services register of consumers who may need extra help if their water supply is interrupted or with the way their services are provided. Anyone can register for the free assistance which includes help if you have limited mobility, are chronically sick or have a disability. To register, contact your water company for more information.

Support is also available to help you communicate with the company if you have a hearing, sight or speech impairment. Some of the services offered for free include:

- large print bills, letters and leaflets
- 'talking' bills - your bill can be read to you over the phone, supplied on tape/CD, or in Braille
- communicate with the company by text relay/text phone or minicom
- arranging for your bills to be sent or copied to someone you nominate, such a relative, friend or carer, who can help you read or check them
- special arrangements to personally contact you in an emergency
- an emergency supply of water if your supply is interrupted and you would find it difficult to leave your residence to get to a collection point
- you can be given a longer time to answer the door
- password scheme to confirm a caller from a water company is genuine
- help reading your water meter if you have difficulty reading it yourself.

8 Tips for saving water

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

- Replace worn washers on leaky taps. A dripping hot water tap wastes energy and over a year can add over £18 to your annual water bill.
- 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 (cover the jug and keep no longer than a day).
- Do not leave the water running while brushing your teeth or shaving.
- 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 your garden thoroughly once a week rather than more frequently and avoid sprinklers.
- Install a water butt to collect rainwater for your garden – it is better for the garden than tap water.
- Install a displacement device in your cistern, such as a Hippo or a Save-a-flush. This saves as much as 3 litres of water with every flush. Your water company may supply them for free.
- Do not use your washing machine or dishwasher on half-load – full loads use less water than two half loads.
- 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.

9 Water meters

The Consumer Council for Water website has a water meter calculator that can estimate if you can cut your water bills by switching to a meter. The calculation is based on your water company's charges and information provided by you about your water usage. Your water company can 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, if plumbing has to be altered.

Note

You can revert to unmeasured charging within two years of installation, but there are exceptions – see section 11. This only applies if you applied for the meter, not to subsequent occupiers of the property who must keep a previously installed meter.

It may be beneficial to switch to a meter if:

- 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 may include:

- you may have to arrange for your meter to be read (although many water meters 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, as with other utility bills
- if you lose water through a leak on pipework beyond the meter, you may have to pay for it, although allowance may be made if this is the first time since it was installed.

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 significant excavation are sometimes repaired free of charge.

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 when asked by a customer but they must offer you an assessed charge bill that more closely reflects your household water use. You then have an option to stay on your current unmetered bill or switch to the assessed one.

Different water companies calculate the assessed charge in different ways. It can be based on the number of occupants, type of property, number of bedrooms or average household charge.

All companies offer a single person assessed charge to closely reflect what a single person would have paid if it was possible to install a meter. Once you know the charge, 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, or you are in an area with a compulsory metering programme and it is not possible to install a meter in your home.

10 Repairing water leaks

You may be responsible for repairing water leaks inside your property and in external pipes up to the boundary of your property. Some water companies offer free repair services for external leaks so check with them whether this is possible.

If a leak is in your supply pipe and not covered by a water company's free repair service, you are responsible for repairing it. If the leak is not repaired within a certain time, the water company may carry out the repair and charge you for the work.

If you rent your home, your landlord may have responsibility for paying for and arranging a leak to be fixed, see section 6.1 of factsheet 67, *Home improvements and repairs* for more information.

If you own your own home, check whether your home insurance contents policy covers repairs for water leaks.

11 Compulsory metering

Water companies are legally entitled to install meters in areas that have been declared as being seriously water stressed. Many of these are in the South East of England. Customers in these areas, are being switched over to water meters and if you live in one of these areas you will have no choice on how you are charged.

If it is not possible to fit a meter at your home you may be placed on an assessed charge, which is a fixed amount that more closely matches the amount of water your household uses.

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

12 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. You may receive a rebate of previous year's charges. The extent of this depends on the policy of your company.

13 Temporary water use restrictions

If there has been a prolonged period of low rainfall, it may become necessary for the water companies to take steps to ensure supplies are maintained and the natural water sources they rely on are conserved. Water companies set out the steps they will take to manage a drought situation in their Drought Plan.

Companies may impose different levels of restrictions on water use depending on the severity of the situation.

These include:

- Temporary Use Restrictions (hosepipe/sprinkler bans)
- drought orders give a water company the power to ban all non-essential use
- drought permits allow companies to take water temporarily from other sources such as rivers and groundwater
- emergency drought orders allow companies to restrict water use in any way deemed necessary, which could, in a very severe drought, mean cutting off water supply to homes and setting up standpipes in streets.

Being water efficient is important at all times but during a drought situation, it helps to conserve limited resources and avoid more severe restrictions becoming necessary.

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

Useful organisations

Citizens Advice

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

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, go to the local Consumer Council for Water.

Environment Agency

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

For information and update reports on drought and flooding in England.

In Wales, see the entry for Welsh Government below.

Office of Water Services (Ofwat)

www.ofwat.gov.uk

Telephone 0121 644 7500

Independent regulatory body who monitor and regulate water company activities.

TrustMark

www.trustmark.org.uk

Telephone 0333 555 1234 Mon-Fri 09.00-17.00

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

Welsh Government

www.wales.gov.uk

Telephone 0300 060 4400

Devolved government for Wales. The environment and countryside department has equal powers to the Environment Agency in England.

Welsh Water

www.dwrcymru.com

Telephone 0800 052 0145 Mon - Fri 08.00-20.00, Sat 08.30-13.30

Not-for-profit company providing water services to consumers in 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 Advice

www.agecymru.org.uk

0800 022 3444

In Northern Ireland contact

Age NI

www.ageni.org

0808 808 7575

In Scotland contact

Age Scotland

www.agescotland.org.uk

0800 124 4222

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