

What to do when it is difficult to pay your energy bills

You and your energy supplier
A series of five leaflets

If you cannot pay an energy bill

If you are unable to pay a gas or electricity bill you must contact your energy supplier as soon as possible. If you delay, you could be building up more debt and there is a possibility that you could be disconnected.

You should be able to arrange an affordable payment plan with your energy supplier.

When bills have to be paid

Electricity bills usually have to be paid within 28 days of you receiving them. Check the exact number of days with your energy supplier.

Gas bills usually have to be paid within 28 days of the date of the bill. Check the exact number of days with your energy supplier.

Some energy suppliers take action or start the disconnection process as early as 10 working days from the date of the bill.

What to do if you are having problems paying your bills

Tell your energy supplier straight away if you cannot pay a bill or keep up with your payments. There are rules that your energy supplier must follow:

- 1 They must give you information about how to avoid getting into debt
- 2 They must give you advice on how to pay back any money that you owe
- 3 They must offer a payment plan that takes into consideration how much you can afford to regularly pay
- 4 They must only offer a prepayment meter as a last resort to disconnecting you

Some suppliers like to have payment plans that pay off debts within a certain period of time, such as six months. You do not have to agree to a payment plan like this if you cannot afford it. Your energy supplier has to take into account your ability to pay no matter how long it will take you to repay the debt.

Ways to pay off your debt

You have different options for repaying a debt to an energy supplier.

Short-term arrangement

If you have a temporary problem, your energy supplier may let you pay in instalments as long as the debt is all paid off before the next bill comes.

Instalments through a payment plan

Your energy supplier should agree to this. Although they do not have to offer this if you have not kept up with a payment plan in the past. A payment plan can be on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis. The amount you regularly pay will include an amount for your current use (this is usually estimated) and an amount towards your debt.

A prepayment meter

A prepayment meter could be installed in your home to collect regular payments towards your debt. These meters also require payment in advance for the electricity or gas you use. Your supplier should take your financial circumstances into account when setting the regular payment toward debt that is recovered from the payments you make to the meter.

Fuel Direct Scheme

Payments can be taken from your benefits to pay off an energy bill debt if you are receiving:

- Income Support
- Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance
- Pension Credits
- Employment and Support Allowance (replaced Incapacity Benefit)

The amount taken will include a fixed amount towards your arrears. This is set at £3.30 per week. The amount will also include payment towards your ongoing energy consumption. This could be as little as £1 per week.

Steps to disconnection

Before an energy supplier can disconnect your supply, they must take certain steps to recover any outstanding payments from you. Not all energy suppliers follow the same steps but the following is a general guide.

Day 1 – you are sent a bill.

Day 14 – a reminder letter is sent to you.

Day 28 – another reminder letter is sent to you and your energy supplier may telephone you.

Day 35 – a final demand letter is sent to you and a letter explaining that you may be disconnected if you do not pay your bill.

Days 42-49 – you receive further reminder phone calls.

Day 60 – a debt adviser from the energy supplier visits your home.

Day 67 – the supplier applies to the courts for a warrant (begins warrant proceedings) to disconnect your energy supply or 'force fit' a pre-payment meter and sends you a 'human rights letter' setting out your rights as the court process begins.

Day 129 – The supplier will 'execute the warrant' and disconnect your supply.

If you have a history of not paying your bills on time, your energy supplier may speed up this process.

You can stop the disconnection process at any time by calling your energy supplier to arrange a payment plan.

How Consumer Focus can help – www.consumerfocus.org.uk

Energy suppliers' details are on the Consumer Focus website.

How Citizens Advice consumer service can help – **08454 04 05 06**

Citizens Advice Consumer Service is a free independent advice service and they can:

- 1 tell you what your rights are
- 2 give you independent advice
- 3 give you information about free services from energy suppliers

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Are you missing out on free services and other benefits?

How to make a complaint

How to switch energy suppliers

Switching energy suppliers when you owe money to your current supplier

For more information, or to receive this leaflet in an alternative format, please telephone on 020 7799 7900 or via email contact@consumerfocus.org.uk.