

A large yellow speech bubble graphic is centered on the page. Inside the bubble, at the top, are three large white pound sterling symbols (£). Below the symbols, the words "ENERGY BEST DEAL" are written in large, bold, orange uppercase letters, slanted upwards from left to right.

£ £ £
**ENERGY
BEST
DEAL**

August 2012



Examples of help found through Energy Best Deal

This booklet has been produced by Ofgem, Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland as a guide to ensure you are receiving the best deal from your energy supplier. It also highlights the help that is available from both energy suppliers and Government if you are struggling to pay your energy bills.

Jill had received lots of telephone calls and letters saying that she was entitled to a free grant for loft insulation as her husband is over 65. She was very suspicious of these and always thought there was a catch in it. Then Jill attended the Energy Best Deal workshop where she learnt that they were in fact a genuine offer and that her energy supplier was providing this service. Following the Energy Best Deal workshop Jill contacted her supplier and had her loft insulated free of charge.

Margaret attended an Energy Best Deal workshop in Liverpool. The next day she called the trainer to say that as soon as she went home after the workshop, she contacted her energy supplier who has now transferred her onto another, cheaper tariff and her weekly payment has been reduced to £20. This means a yearly saving of just under £500.

To make sure you are on the best energy deal, ask yourself these questions annually:

- Would switching supplier(s) save me money?
- Am I eligible for welfare benefits?
- Am I eligible for a grant to improve the insulation and energy efficiency of my home?
- Am I on the best energy tariff¹ (dependent on your needs)?
- Am I on the best payment option?²

It is now easier than ever to shop around and choose the best energy deal. Suppliers are now required:

- to provide clearer information on bills
- to provide you with an annual statement (telling you what tariff you are on, the amount of gas or electricity used for the past 12 months with that supplier, estimated cost in £s for the next 12 months supply)
- to allow card, key or token meter customers to switch even if you have debts of up to £500
- to not charge you more for one payment type than another, unless the charges can be justified by cost.

If you talk to a sales representative who knocks on your door or who has a sales stall in a supermarket, it is important to remember that they may only work for one energy supplier so they will only be able to show you deals from that particular supplier. It is important to have information from your annual statement or latest bills with you when considering any deal.

¹ There are a number of different tariffs, for example, online, fixed, single fuel or dual fuel tariff.

² There are a number of different payment options, for example prepayment, quarterly cash or cheque or direct debit.

How to get the best deal

You'll need the following information to start off with:

- the name of the tariff you are currently on (if you don't know you can contact your supplier)
- how much you spent on energy in the last year
- how you currently pay for your energy
- your postcode.

This information can be found on your annual statement from your energy supplier as well as on your bill.

There are different ways you can find out about potentially better energy deals:

- talk to your supplier or view their website
- use one of the approved online price comparison services listed on Consumer Focus' website **www.consumerfocus.org.uk**
- if you cannot access the internet you can call the Citizens Advice consumer service on **08454 040506** for a pricing factsheet for your area or general advice
- contact other energy suppliers to compare deals (numbers are at the end of this booklet).



Things to consider

Energy suppliers offer a wide range of payment options but it is important to consider the disadvantages as well as the benefits associated with all payment arrangements, based on your individual circumstances, before deciding on what is the best method for you.

PAYMENT TYPES

- **Weekly/fortnightly/monthly budget payments**

- ✓ small payments on a regular basis
- ✗ some Post Offices and banks may charge for use of this facility to make payments

Generally suits households without bank accounts and those repaying debts.

- **Card meter/token meter/key meter**

- ✓ can budget according to means
- ✗ if credit runs out there is limited emergency credit before supply is disconnected

Generally suits customers who want to avoid getting into debt or who want to manage an existing debt.



- **Fuel Direct**

- ✓ payment for current use of energy and debt taken directly out of benefits
- ✗ if you use more than the amount deducted from your benefits, your debt will increase and so will future payments

Generally suits those who have difficulty managing their finances and on certain benefits.

- **Monthly or quarterly direct debit/standing order**

- ✓ payment is the same time and amount every month, which may help with budgeting
- ✗ may be paying too much or too little if bills have been estimated

Generally suits households with regular income or have a bank/building society account.

If you have an outstanding debt to your energy supplier and you try and switch to a different supplier, you may find yourself 'debt blocked'. This means that your current gas or electricity supplier has the right to prevent you from leaving until you have paid off your debt to them. You can't be debt blocked if it is your supplier's fault you are in debt, for example due to incorrect meter readings or billing problems.

If you use a card, token or key meter and owe your energy supplier less than £500, you can switch supplier and transfer your debt to your new supplier. By doing this you may benefit from a lower price for their energy and potentially be able to pay off your debt faster.

If you have a debt with your gas or electricity supplier and are struggling to make payments or cannot agree a payment plan with them contact the Citizens Advice consumer service.

Most energy suppliers offer fixed price tariffs, these may be cheaper than other tariffs but be aware that you may need to pay by direct debit. When the deal ends, you will need to get your timing right when you switch to another deal and there could be penalties if you switch before the end of the current deal/offer.

Having decided on the best energy deal...

If you are staying with your current supplier but changing to a different payment option or tariff your supplier will arrange the change. If you have chosen a new supplier...

- 1 Agree a contract:** either face-to-face with a salesperson, over the telephone or on the internet. The process to transfer supply from one company to another should take no longer than three weeks after the end of the cooling-off period.
- 2 Cooling-off period:** suppliers should phone or write to you to make sure you understand that a contract has been entered into and that you are happy with the way the sale was made. You have the right to cancel the contract within a seven-day period.





- 3 Tell the existing supplier:** either by writing to them or give them a call. If they don't know you want to change they may block the transfer. There may be circumstances where the existing supplier can prevent switching to a new supplier – this normally occurs where there is an existing fuel debt and the current supplier insists that this debt be repaid before a transfer will be allowed.
- 4 Pay any outstanding bills:** otherwise the supplier may block the transfer. Cancel any Direct Debits or Standing Orders set up to pay the existing supplier.
- 5 Take a meter reading:** the new supplier will read the meter (or ask for a customer reading) around the time of the switch. The old supplier will use the meter reading to work out the final bill and the new supplier will use it to start the new account. Keep a note of the reading in case of any future dispute.

If you experience any problems during the switching process you can either contact your old or new supplier or Citizens Advice consumer service.

Group buying – another saving option

Collective purchasing and switching – there are benefits to joining together with your neighbours and combining your buying power to get better electricity and gas deals. For more information visit the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) website: www.decc.gov.uk

Oil clubs – by joining a club they will negotiate with suppliers the best bulk purchase price for heating oil. The club can help your cash flow by allowing you to order smaller amounts four times a year but still benefit from the bulk pricing. For more information visit the Citizens Advice website: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/oilclubs.htm



Special services

If you are of pensionable age, disabled, chronically sick or have sight/hearing difficulties you can qualify for your supplier's Priority Service Register (PSR). This entitles you to additional services, such as:

Free gas appliance safety check

This check will ensure that gas appliances are safe and that they are not giving out a harmful level of carbon monoxide. Free annual check for owner occupiers on a means-tested benefit who live alone or with other adults all of whom also qualify for the free service or who live with others at least one of whom is aged under five. If the gas supply must be turned off for safety reasons, and all adults in the home are eligible for the Priority Services Register, alternative cooking and heating facilities will be provided.

Relocation of meter for improved access

If it is difficult to read or access the electricity or gas meter, energy suppliers will consider moving the meter, free of charge, to a more convenient position.

Password protection scheme

Suppliers can agree a personal password for use by their staff when they visit the home, to protect against bogus callers pretending to be their representatives.

Quarterly meter readings

Some suppliers do this as standard, but if customers have difficulty in reading their meter or are worried about inaccurate bills, their supplier can arrange for someone to call every quarter to read the meter.

Bill nominee scheme

On request, bills can be sent to the address of a friend, relative or carer so that they can help to arrange payment.

Advance notice if electricity supply is to be interrupted.

Suppliers should recognise the possible increased dependence on energy services by vulnerable consumers e.g. those reliant on electricity to operate medical equipment, and make special efforts to provide these consumers with advance warning of supply interruptions.

Services for customers with impaired hearing or vision

Suppliers can provide Braille and talking bills and must also have available suitable facilities to handle complaints and enquiries from customers who are visually or hearing impaired.

In addition, suppliers are also prohibited from disconnecting any premises occupied by a customer eligible for the Priority Services Register (PSR) during the winter months (1 October – 31 March).

Difficulties paying your energy bills

If your bill is unexpectedly high, contact your gas or electricity supplier to have the meter read or provide your own reading. An unexpectedly high bill may be caused by the meter being misread, or by a succession of underestimated bills followed by an accurate bill. Energy suppliers will work with you to find solutions to payment difficulties but can only do this if you tell them about the problem.

Managing energy bills – depending on your supplier and your circumstances, you could receive help from them. Some examples include: rebates to certain customers who may qualify if they are over 60, on certain benefits or who are on a low income; money off your energy bill; benefit entitlement checks to ensure the customer



is receiving all government benefits to which they are entitled and trust funds which offer grants to customers, for example to write off debts or purchase new appliances.

Debt repayment – if you are in debt to your supplier they must offer a payment arrangement that takes into consideration your financial circumstances and your ability to pay. For example you could repay your debt through the Fuel Direct scheme, if you are in receipt of the following benefits: income support; job seekers allowance; pension credits or employment and support allowance. A fixed sum will be removed weekly from your benefits by the Department of Work and Pensions and passed on to your energy supplier.

Avoiding Disconnection – If you let your energy debts build up there is a risk of eventually being disconnected, which means having your energy cut off by your supplier. If you are threatened with disconnection there are strict rules as to who can or cannot be disconnected. You cannot be disconnected in the six months between October to March if you are of pensionable age and live alone or you live with



people who are of pensionable age or under the age of 18. If you have a pensioner living with you, you should inform your energy supplier as they must take all reasonable steps not to disconnect. The same rule applies if someone living in your home is chronically sick or disabled.

There is also a voluntary agreement you should be aware of if you buy your energy from any of the six main suppliers. These are British Gas, Scottish and Southern Energy, E.ON, npower, EDF Energy and ScottishPower. All these companies have agreed to not knowingly disconnect vulnerable customers from electricity or gas supplies at any time of the year. A person is regarded as vulnerable if for reasons of age, health, disability or severe financial insecurity they are unable to safeguard their personal welfare or the welfare of other members of the household.

You cannot be disconnected:

- if you have a debt relief order
- if your debt is owed to a previous supplier
- if you have been made bankrupt and the debt relates to a period before you went bankrupt or if the debt is not for the gas or electricity you have used but for some other service or appliance you have bought from your supplier.

Specific help is available for people who have either been threatened with disconnection or who have actually been disconnected. You can find out more about this by calling Citizens Advice consumer service.

Where to **find help**

- **Home Heat helpline**

This is a free national helpline run by the six main energy suppliers for customers having difficulties paying their fuel bills. It offers specialist advice on benefits, grants for free home insulation, reduced tariffs and special payment options the energy suppliers provide. The Home Heat Helpline is open 9am-8pm Monday to Friday and 10am-2pm on Saturdays and is free to call – **0800 33 66 99** or visit their website at **www.homeheathelpline.org.uk**

- **Warm Home Discount scheme**

Energy suppliers offer some of their more vulnerable customers rebates and assistance under this scheme. Call your supplier to see if you qualify, or if you have been on an Energy Best Deal session speak to the person who ran it as they'll have more information.

There are government initiatives available to some customers that can make energy more affordable. The key ones are:

- **The Winter Fuel Payment** is an annual payment to help people aged 60 and over with the costs of keeping warm during the winter. Payments vary between £125-£400 depending on individual circumstances. For further advice call the Winter Fuel Payments helpline on **08459 15 15 15** or visit **www.direct.gov.uk**



- **Cold weather payments** help eligible households in an area where a period of exceptionally cold weather has occurred. A payment of £25 will automatically be made for each seven day period between 1 November and 31 March when the local temperature is an average of zero degrees celsius or lower over seven consecutive days. Eligible households are those:

- in receipt of Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance or Pension Credit

and *at least one of the following*

- in receipt of pensioner premium, higher pensioner premium
- enhanced pensioner premium
- disability premium, severe disability premium or disabled child premium
- the household contains a child under 5 years old.

Where to find help **continued**

- **In England**

Warm Front can provide a package of insulation and heating improvements, for qualifying households, up to the value of £3,500 (or £6,000 if oil, low carbon or renewable technologies are recommended). For more information contact the Warm Front team on **0800 316 2805** or go to **www.direct.gov.uk**

- **In Wales**

Nest is the Welsh Government's scheme to help households in Wales to reduce their fuel bills. Nest can provide you with a range of advice and support including advice on how to save energy, access help to make your home more energy efficient, have a benefit entitlement check to ensure you are receiving all the income you are entitled to, and advice on money management. If you receive a means tested benefit and live in a property that is privately owned or privately rented and has an energy efficiency rating of F or G you may also be able to receive a package of energy improvement measures for your home at no cost to yourself. For more information you can contact Nest on **0808 808 2244** or go to **www.nestwales.org.uk**

- **In Scotland**

The Energy Assistance Package is funded by the Scottish Government and managed by the Energy Savings Trust. It gives advice and support to help consumers cut fuel bills and make homes warmer / comfortable. For more information contact them on **0800 512 012** or go to **www.energyassistancepackage.com**

The Universal Home Insulation Scheme (UHIS) provides energy efficiency measures to a large number of Scottish households while delivering emission savings and helping to reduce fuel poverty. It may offer you free loft and cavity wall insulation, depending on where you live. The scheme is delivered by local authorities in conjunction with local delivery partners. To find out if you live in a UHIS area and what UHIS can offer you, call the Home Energy Scotland Hotline on **0800 512 012**.

Saving money by being energy efficient

There are a range of things that can be done to make your house more energy efficient – therefore cutting your energy bills. You can speak to your energy supplier or for independent advice contact **0800 512 012** (Scotland), or **0300 123 1234** (England and Wales), **www.gov.uk/energyhelp**

Top tips for saving energy:

- 1** If you have a timer, set the heating and hot water to come on only when required: 30 minutes before you get up in the morning and set it to switch off 30 minutes before you are due to leave.
- 2** Set the hot water cylinder thermostat to either 60 degrees Celsius or 140 degrees Fahrenheit.
- 3** Close your curtains at dusk to stop heat escaping through the windows and check for draughts around windows and doors.
- 4** Always turn off the light when you leave a room.
- 5** Don't leave appliances on standby and remember not to leave laptops and mobile phones on charge unnecessarily.
- 6** When you are doing the washing try to fill up the machine, tumble dryer or dishwasher. One full load uses less energy than two half loads.

- 7 Try and ensure that you only boil as much water as you need.
- 8 A dripping hot water tap can waste enough energy in a single week to fill half a bath. Fix leaking taps and make sure they are fully turned off.
- 9 Energy saving light bulbs last up to ten times longer than ordinary bulbs and can save around £45 over the lifetime of the bulb.

With a little effort and research you can ensure that you are not spending any more on energy than you absolutely need.



Energy suppliers' **contact numbers**

British Gas	0800 072 8629
Ebico	0800 458 7689
Ecotricity	0800 030 2302
EDF Energy (including customers of Seaboard and SWEB)	0800 056 7777
E.ON	0345 059 9905
First Utility	0845 215 5000
Good Energy	0845 456 1640
Green Energy	0800 783 8851
Loco2energy	0845 074 3601
npower	0800 073 3000



OVO Energy	0800 599 9440
Scottish Hydro	0800 980 2472
ScottishPower	0800 027 0404
Scottish & Southern Energy (including customers of Equigas/Equipower, Atlantic, Severn Trent Energy, Southern Electric)	0845 026 0658
Spark Energy	0845 034 7474
SWALEC	0845 026 0656
Telecom Plus (including Utility Warehouse)	0844 815 7777
The Co-operative Energy	0800 954 0693
Utilita	0845 450 4357

The main six energy suppliers (British Gas; EDF Energy; E.ON; npower; ScottishPower and Scottish & Southern Energy) can provide a professional translation/interpreter service if English is not your first language. Call your supplier and let them know that you'd like this service, or that a family member or friend wishes to use the service – in order to feel confident in communicating with the supplier.

View our online videos at:

www.financialskillsforlife.org.uk/fsfl_projects_energybestdeal.htm

Energy Best Deal is a consumer campaign run by Citizens Advice and their partners in England, Scotland and Wales. It offers domestic energy consumers and frontline advice workers (both paid workers and volunteers) the opportunity to attend an information session on getting a better deal on their energy bills. Ofgem has supported the campaign from its launch in 2008, having funded the pilot.

The 2012/13 Energy Best Deal campaign is funded by British Gas; EDF Energy; E.ON; ScottishPower; Scottish and Southern Energy

The Ofgem logo consists of the word "ofgem" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font, centered within an orange rounded rectangle.

www.ofgem.gov.uk



www.citizensadvice.org.uk