

Water meters – your questions answered



Information for household customers

Water meters – your questions answered

Our role is to make sure that your water company provides you with a good quality service at a fair price.

Although it seems to rain a lot in England and Wales, water is a scarce resource in some parts of the country – particularly in the south and south-east of England. And it is likely to become more scarce in the future as our demand for water grows, our population increases and our climate changes.

The water companies we regulate are taking action now to make sure that supplies continue to be secure in future. This includes tackling leakage, promoting water efficiency and installing meters.

This leaflet provides information for household customers about metering.

Contents

About water meters	3
Deciding whether to have a meter	13
If your company cannot install a meter	15
If your company wants to install a meter at your property	19
Help with your bill	22
Further information	25

About water meters

What are water meters?

A water meter is a device that measures how much water you use. It is similar to your gas or electricity meter. Your supplier uses readings from the meter to calculate how much to charge you for your water and sewerage services.

If you have a meter, the amount you pay will depend on how much water you have used. If you do not have a meter, you will be charged a fixed amount each year ('unmetered' charges). These charges usually relate to the rateable value of your property. You should check your bill to see how you pay for your water.

Some people regard meters as the fairest way to charge for water and sewerage services. This is because you pay for how much water you use. Research that the Consumer Council for Water and Ofwat carried out found that most customers think metering is the fairest way to charge.

At the moment, about 40% of customers in England and Wales have a water meter. But this number is slowly increasing.



How is my bill worked out if I have a meter?

Your water company will usually read your meter twice a year. If it cannot read your meter, it will estimate how much water you have used so that it can send you a bill. You can also provide a meter reading to your company yourself at any time. If you disagree with your estimated bill and want one based on your own meter reading, the company will send you a further bill based on that reading.

It is a good idea to read your meter regularly and give the company a reading so your bills are more accurate. It will also help you to track how much water you are using and make it easier to spot leaks.

Your bill is usually made up of a:

- standing charge for water, which is fixed and covers the costs to the company of reading, maintaining and replacing meters and administering customers' accounts;
- charge for water, measured in cubic metres (m³);
- standing charge for used (waste) water, which is fixed and covers the same costs as the standing charge outlined above; and
- charge for collecting and treating your dirty water, measured in cubic metres.

If you receive your water service and your sewerage service from different suppliers, you may receive two bills – one from each company.

If surface rainwater from your property drains to the public sewer, your sewerage company will also charge you to take the water away. This is called the surface water drainage charge and it covers the cost of collecting and treating the rainwater.

If the surface water from your property does not drain to the public sewer and you are being charged for surface water drainage, you should contact your company. You may be entitled to a rebate on your bill. The charge for surface water drainage

may be included in the wastewater standing charge or the volumetric charge. It may also appear as a separate item on your bill.

The companies also treat water that falls onto the public roads and drains to the sewers and collect a charge for this. This service is called highway drainage. You will be liable for highway drainage charges if you are connected to the public sewer for foul or surface water drainage.

Will my bill go up or down if I have a meter?

Many people find that they can save money by having a meter installed. Your bill will be higher or lower depending on:

- how much you pay now;
- the number of people in your home;
- how much water each of you uses; and
- how much you are able to reduce your water use.

You should contact your company to find out if you might benefit from having a meter. You can also find a water meter calculator on the Consumer Council for Water's website (www.ccwater.org.uk).



How can I save money on my bill?

Having a meter will make you more aware about how much water you use. You may be able to save money on your bill if you use less water. Using water wisely can also help reduce your gas or electricity bills because heating water uses a lot of energy.

You only have to make small changes to start saving water. Many companies offer free water-saving devices. Contact your company for more information about water-saving measures you can introduce in your home.

How do I find my water meter?

Your meter will normally be located:

- outside your home (look for a small metal or plastic cover in your driveway, garden or nearby footpath);
- in a small wall-mounted box on the side of your property; or
- inside your property (normally where the water supply pipe enters your home, usually under the kitchen sink).

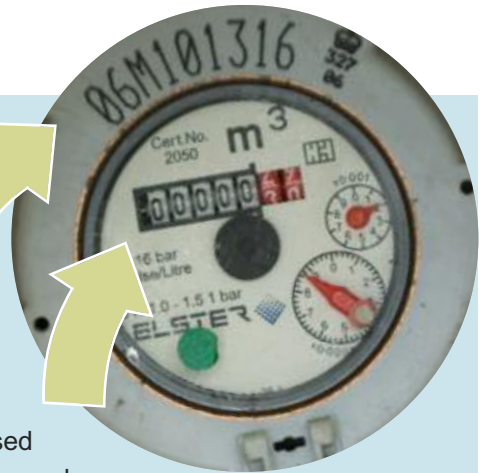
If you cannot find your meter, contact your water company. It should tell you where the meter is located.

Reading your meter

Serial number: This is a unique number. It should match the serial number on your bill. If not, you could be paying someone else's bill.

Black and white or digital numbers:

These show how much water you have used measured in cubic metres. (A cubic metre equals 1,000 litres.) This is what your company uses to calculate your bill – and what you should quote when you give the company a reading.



Simple ways to save water

1. Turn off the tap while brushing your teeth. A running tap wastes more than six litres of water a minute.
2. Make sure that your washing machine and dishwasher (if you have one) are full before you use them. Try to use the most water and energy efficient settings.
3. Fix a dripping tap. This can save as much as 75 litres of water a day.
4. Use a bowl to wash up rather than leaving the hot tap running. You could save about £25 a year on your energy bills.
5. Install a water butt. The average rooftop collects 85,000 litres of water every year. A water butt is a great way to put some of this to use.



6. Check the overflow on your toilet cistern to make sure it is not using more water than necessary.



What are my rights and responsibilities?

Asking for a meter to be installed

- You have the right to request a meter. This should be free of charge unless changes to your plumbing are required.
- Your water company should install the meter within three months of your request.
- If it does not do this, the company should offer to adjust your bill to reflect the charges you would have paid if you had been on a meter.
- The company can refuse your request to install a meter if it would be impractical or too expensive to do so (see page 15).

Deciding where the meter should go

- The company will choose where to put the meter. You can ask for it to be installed in a different place, but you may be required to pay the difference in costs.
- If you have special requirements because of age, illness or disability, the company may fit the meter free of charge in a location that is easy for you to access (see page 24).

Altering or extending your home

- The company cannot insist you pay metered charges.
- But it is allowed to change the unmetered charges you pay.

Moving house

- You should provide your company with a meter reading as soon as you move in or out so that your bill is accurate.
- The company can charge you using the meter if you are the new occupier of a property (provided it has not already sent you an unmetered bill). It can also install a meter on change of occupier.

Changing your mind

- If you choose to have a meter installed, you can switch back to your previous method of charging within the first 12 months. The company will not remove the meter.
- You may not be able to switch back to unmetered charges if you live in an area of water stress where the Government has allowed compulsory metering (see page 19) as part of a plan to maintain secure water supplies.

Removing or moving the meter

- The company will not normally remove a meter after it has installed one.
- The company may move your meter to a more convenient location if you ask it to, but it may charge you for doing so.
- If you have special requirements, the company may move your meter to a location where you are able to read it. It will do this free of charge. Alternatively, the company may provide an outreader in a position that is more convenient or provide a more frequent meter reading service for you.

Reading the meter

- As a minimum, the company should read your meter once every two years. Most companies read meters twice a year.
- You can provide readings to your company at any time. If you do not receive a bill, you should tell the company so that you do not build up debt.

Tampering with the meter

- It is illegal to tamper with the meter.

Maintaining the meter

- The company is responsible for maintaining the meter.

Identifying faults

- You need to tell your company if the meter is moving when you are not using any water. It can advise you how to check for underground leaks or problems with your household plumbing.
- You can ask your company to test the meter – but you will have to pay for the test if no faults are found.

Fixing leaks

- If your bill is high and you suspect it is because you have a leak on your property, you should report it to your company.
- Supply pipe leaks are the customer's responsibility. Your company will normally help you find and fix the leak for free, or at a subsidised cost, if it is the first time you have reported a leak.
- Subject to certain conditions, the company is also required to reduce your bill to take account of the extra water you have used because of a supply pipe leak.

If you have problems with your bill or cannot afford to pay

- You should contact your company immediately. It can offer help and advice (see page 22).



Deciding whether or not to have a meter

Would I benefit from having a meter installed?

If you choose to have a meter installed (an 'optional meter'), you could save money on your water bill. Your company can help you estimate how much water you use and tell you if you would save money. You could also use the water meter calculator on the Consumer Council for Water's website (www.ccwater.org.uk).

If you decide to have a meter, your company will usually install it free of charge. The company is required to check the supply pipe for leaks before installing a meter.

How do I get a meter installed?

There is a simple process to follow.

1. Contact your company to find out the savings you may make by having a meter.
2. If you can make savings, ask for an application form for a meter.
3. Fill in the application form and return it to your company. You can usually do this by post, over the phone or online.
4. Subject to a survey, the company will fit the meter within three months of receiving your application.
5. You should receive your first water bill within six months of the meter being installed.

In some cases, the company is not able to fit a meter. See page 15 for information on the options available to you if this is the case.

I am a tenant. Can I still apply for a meter?

If you live in rented accommodation, you still have the right to apply for a meter. We recommend that you ask your landlord's permission before applying for a meter. If you have a fixed-term tenancy agreement of less than six months, you must ask the landlord's permission.

If your fixed-term tenancy agreement is longer than six months, your landlord cannot stop you from having a meter. However, you may need their consent to alter or improve their property.

If I have chosen to have a meter installed, can I change my mind later?

Yes you can.

- If you change your mind before the meter is installed, contact your company immediately to cancel your request.
- If your meter has already been installed, the company will not remove it. But as long as you make contact within 12 months of the meter being installed, the company will give you the option of going back to paying an unmetered charge.

If the Government has allowed the company that supplies your water to compulsorily meter its customers, then you may not be able to switch back to unmetered charges.

The Environment Agency has advised the Government which areas of England it considers to be short of water (or 'water stressed'). Water companies in these areas can ask the Government for permission to compulsorily meter their customers. Most of south-east and eastern England is classed as being seriously water stressed.

If your company cannot install a meter

What happens if I would like a meter but my company cannot fit one for me?

It may not be possible for your company to install a meter at your property. This may be because:

- there is more than one supply of water to the property;
- your property is on a shared supply;
- the pipework inside your property is inaccessible, obstructed or in poor condition;
- the company is not able to find a suitable place to fit the meter internally or externally; or
- you live in a flat and have access to communal facilities or a shared hot water supply.

If your company says that it cannot fit a meter at your property, it should explain why it is impractical or too expensive to do so. If you disagree with your company's decision not to install a meter, you can ask us to investigate this on your behalf and make a decision. Our contact details are on page 25.

Your company should also offer you the option to switch to an 'assessed charge'. This is an estimate of what your metered bill might have been had a meter been installed.

You will need to compare the assessed charge with your current bill to decide if you will save money. Your company will be able to give you more information.

How much will I pay under the assessed charge?

The way that assessed charges are set varies from company to company.

The most common charges are based on:

- the number of bedrooms in your property;
- the type of property you live in;
- the number of people who live in the property; or
- a fixed charge based on the average metered bill in your company's area.

Each company decides how it will work out the assessed charge and applies this consistently to all customers affected. You should contact your company for more information about its assessed charges.

The company may also apply an assessed charge if your property has been altered substantially, as your original unmetered charge will no longer be valid.

What happens if I live in a flat and I cannot have a meter?

We have encouraged the companies we regulate to offer a common billing arrangement for customers in blocks of flats where shared water supplies mean that it is not possible for occupants to have individual meters.

In such cases, the company will install a single meter to measure all water supplied to the block of flats. This arrangement would involve the landlord and all tenants agreeing that the company can raise a single bill for the supply to the block. They would also agree that a single person or organisation (for example, a landlord or management company) would take responsibility and recover charges from the tenants.

If you buy water or sewerage services from another person or company instead of directly from your company, you will be protected by rules set out in the 'Water Resale Order'. You can find out more about this from our website.

What happens if I do not agree with the assessed charge?

Unless the Government has allowed your company to meter customers compulsorily, you have the option of continuing to pay your current unmetered charge. You should tell your company if this is what you want to do.

Why can't I automatically be put on an assessed charge?

Assessed charges are only available for customers who cannot have a meter installed. Your company will need to decide that it is unable to install a meter at your property before it offers you this charge.

The purpose of the charge is to make sure that customers are not unreasonably disadvantaged because they cannot have a meter. The charge is not available to customers if the company can fit a meter at their property.





If your company wants to install a meter at your property

Why is my water company installing meters?

Companies are installing meters as part of their plans to make sure there is enough water for customers now and in the future. Meters provide them with important information that helps them reduce leakage and manage supplies more effectively. Customers with a meter use an average of 10% less water. By being careful not to waste water, you can help to:

- save money;
- protect the environment;
- safeguard water and sewerage services for the future; and
- keep bills lower, for example by reducing the need to build expensive new reservoirs.

Do I have to have a meter?

Your company can choose to install a meter at your property. However, it can only charge you using the meter if you:

- use an automatic watering device (such as a garden sprinkler);
- automatically fill a swimming pool;
- have a power shower or extra large bath;
- use a reverse osmosis water softening unit;
- are the new occupier of a property (provided it has not already sent you an unmetered bill); or
- live in a water stressed area where the Government has allowed compulsory metering as part of a plan to maintain secure water supplies.

I do not want a meter. What are my options?

If one or more of the conditions for compulsory metering outlined above applies to you, your company is allowed to install a meter and charge you according to how much water you use.

If you are worried about having a meter, your company can offer help and advice about how to reduce your bill. It will also explain the many different ways in which you can use water more efficiently. See page 22 for more information about what to do if you are having difficulty paying your bill.

How will I know if my company is going to install a meter?

Your company should write to give you advance notice of its intention to charge you on a metered basis.

You can contact your company directly or check its website to see if it has a compulsory metering programme in place that may affect you.

Your company should contact you to make an appointment to install your meter. If it does not keep that appointment, it is required to make a payment to you.

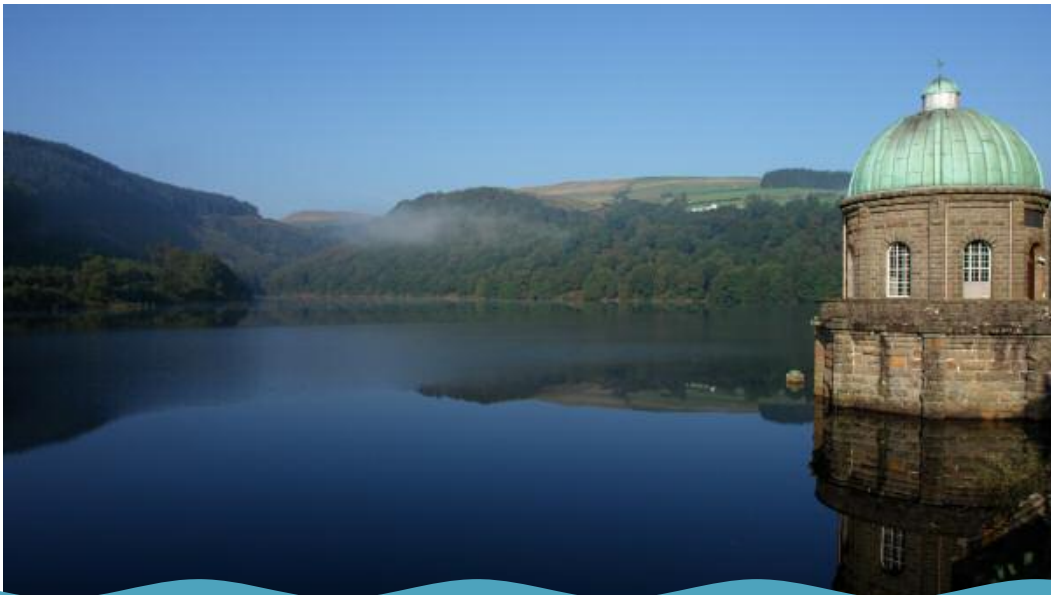
Why don't companies fix more leaks or build more reservoirs instead?

We expect each company to balance supply and demand for water in a way that provides the best value for customers and the environment.

Your company can only carry out compulsory metering if it proves that this is the most efficient way to secure water supplies now and in the future.

It must also show that it has looked at other approaches to meeting demand, such as tackling leakage and building more reservoirs. Adopting such approaches, however, is expensive. It can increase everyone's bills and has other impacts. For example, digging up roads to mend pipes causes disruption, and building reservoirs has a significant environmental impact.

That is why we need to encourage the companies to use the most efficient combination of ways to manage the demand for water. This includes metering.



Help with your bill

What assistance is available to help me pay my bill?

All customers who receive water and sewerage services must pay their bill. But some people find this difficult. Your company should be able to offer advice on the options available to help you. For example, you may find it helpful to pay by instalments. There is no extra charge when you do this.

If you are on a meter, you may be able to reduce the level of your bill by using water more efficiently (see page 7). Your company is obliged to provide information to help you do this.

If your company has a compulsory metering programme, it should provide you with information on the help it can offer you as you move to metered charges.

It is important to ask for help early to stop bills mounting up and making the problem worse.

I am on a low income – what help is available if my bill goes up when I get a meter?

Your bill may not necessarily go up. But if it does, your company can offer a range of options to help you pay your bill. These include:

- payment options – each company is required to offer various payment options. It may be able to offer one that is more suitable for you, for example by breaking down your bill into affordable amounts;
- the WaterSure scheme – each company is required to offer a capped bill to

qualifying low-income metered household customers. See page 23 for more information on this scheme;

- charitable trust schemes – many companies offer trust funds or payment matching schemes to help household customers who are in financial difficulties; and
- third party deduction schemes (also called ‘Water Direct’) – if you are in arrears and on specified means-tested benefits, it may be possible for payments to be made directly to the company from your benefits.

You should contact your company as soon as possible if you are having difficulty paying your bill so it can try to help you. You can also find out more about its procedures in its codes of practice on debt. You can get a free copy from your company.

I am on a low income and I need to use a lot of water. What help is available if my bill goes up when I go onto a meter?

Every company offers the ‘WaterSure’ tariff. This caps the bills for certain metered household customers at the average household bill for their area. WaterSure is the name given to the vulnerable groups tariff, which was introduced in England by Government regulations in April 2000. The companies operating in Wales offer similar tariffs on a voluntary basis.

It applies to metered customers who receive specified benefits and:

- have three or more dependant children living with them; or
- suffer from (or have someone living with them who suffers from) a medical condition that involves using large volumes of water.

If you think you may be eligible, contact your company for more information on how to apply.

Is any other special assistance available?

Water companies are expected to offer special services to customers who, because of age, illness or disability, require special help in the way services are delivered to them.

For example, your company will:

- provide information you require, including on metering, in a form that you can use and understand;
- offer you a password scheme to prevent bogus callers;
- be able to check how much water you are using at reasonable intervals; and
- move your meter to a place where you can get to it easily or provide a meter reading service, at no additional cost.

In addition, if you ask for specific help or services from your company, it should record this information on a special register and include details of your particular requirements. This avoids you having to explain your needs every time you deal with them.

You should contact your water company if you require special help.

Further information

If you want to find out more about meters or you wish to contact your water company, their contact details are on the next page.

You can also obtain information and advice from the Consumer Council for Water. This is an independent organisation that represents customers' interests. Its services are free.

You can contact the Consumer Council for Water by phoning **0121 345 1000** or **0845 039 2837** (this will direct you to your local committee).

You can also email them at enquiries@ccwater.org.uk

If you wish to dispute the decision of your company not to install a meter at your property, you should contact us at:

Ofwat
Centre City Tower
7 Hill Street
Birmingham B5 4UA
United Kingdom
Phone: 0121 644 7500
Email: enquiries@ofwat.gsi.gov.uk



Phone numbers for water and sewerage companies

Anglian Water
01480 323 000

Southern Water
01903 264 444

Dŵr Cymru
01443 452 300

Thames Water
0845 9200 888

Northumbrian Water
08706 084820

United Utilities
01925 237 000

Severn Trent Water
0121 722 4000

Wessex Water
01225 526 000

South West Water
01392 446 688

Yorkshire Water
01274 691 111

Phone numbers for water only companies

1. Bournemouth & West
Hampshire Water
01202 591 111

5. Dee Valley Water
01978 846 946

2. Bristol Water
0117 966 5881

6. Essex & Suffolk Water
01245 491 234

3. Cambridge Water
01223 706 050

7. Hartlepool Water
01429 858 050

4. Cholderton & District Water
01980 629 203

8. Portsmouth Water
023 9249 9888

9. South East Water

0845 223 5111

10. South Staffs Water

01922 638 282

11. Sutton & East Surrey Water

01737 772 000

12. Veolia Water Central

(formerly Three Valleys Water)

01707 268 111

13. Veolia Water East

(formerly Tendring

Hundred Water)

0845 1489288

14. Veolia Water Southeast

(formerly Folkestone &

Dover Water)

01303 298 800



Ofwat (The Water Services Regulation Authority) is a non-ministerial government department. We are responsible for making sure that the water and sewerage sectors in England and Wales provide consumers with a good quality and efficient service at a fair price.



Ofwat
Centre City Tower
7 Hill Street
Birmingham B5 4UA

Phone: 0121 644 7500

Fax: 0121 644 7699

Website: www.ofwat.gov.uk

Email: enquiries@ofwat.gsi.gov.uk

Photographs © Environment Agency, Getty Images,
Transport for London
Printed on 75% minimum de-inked post-consumer
waste paper
November 2010

ISBN 1-904655-73-4

© Crown copyright 2010

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/> or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU or email psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is also available on our website at www.ofwat.gov.uk. Any enquiries about this publication should be sent to the above address.