

UTILITY BILLS

Most tenants of private sector rented housing are responsible for paying the household bills, such as gas, electricity, water rates, internet and telephone. You should check your tenancy agreement for details of what household bills you need to pay in addition to the rent.

This leaflet deals with;

- Moving in
- Suppliers
- Liability for paying bills
- Problems with bills
- TV Licenses
- Moving out.

Please see the Advice Centre leaflet "Students and Council Tax" for information on Council Tax bills.

MOVING IN

You should check your tenancy agreement to clarify whether the tenants or the landlord are responsible for paying the bills. Most tenancy agreements have a clause that says the tenants are responsible for gas, electricity, water rates, telephone, internet, TV License and Council Tax (sometimes referred to as charges under the Local Government Finance Act 1992).

When you move in you should notify the suppliers of gas, electricity, water, and telephone. You will have to fill in an application form indicating that you want a supply. On this form you should list **all** the names of the people who will be living in the property and ask all of them to sign the form. This is to avoid problems with liability (see pt 4).

Take a forwarding address and a parents' or home address for all tenants. Should you need to send them a letter about their share of the bill, this can make it easier.

Make sure you take a reading of the gas and electricity meters, and make a note of it, and the day it was taken, on the sheet provided at the back of this booklet. Ask the supplier to read the meter as well. Try to agree the meter reading with the previous tenants. Check your first bill to ensure that it does not include the previous tenants' charges.

SUPPLIERS

Before you change your supplier you should check your tenancy agreement and discuss with your landlord if this is possible. Some landlords do not allow tenants to change their supplier.

Before signing a contract, it is worth shopping around to compare prices, standing charges, termination of contract fees, payment options, and the company's policy if you cannot pay your bill. Don't sign up if you are unsure.

To compare the different rates available from gas and electricity suppliers in your area go to www.consumerfocus.org.uk and look at the frequently asked question section.

To find the best deal, go to a comparison website such as www.uswitch.com or www.energyhelpline.com

If you are not sure who is your fuel supplier, contact

Gas 0870 608 1524

Electricity 0845 330 0889

LIABILITY FOR PAYING BILLS

The person who requested the supply of gas or electricity will be liable to pay for it and their name will appear on the bill. Problems can occur when only one tenant is named on the bill and the other tenants do not pay their share. The other tenants sometimes escape payment because they are not named on the bill and as a result will not be pursued by the utility company. This is why it is important to ensure that everyone living in the property is named on the bill.

If the bill remains in the name of an ex tenant or is addressed to 'the occupier' fuel companies can hold current tenants liable under a 'deemed contract'. This is because even though they are not named on the bill they have lived in the property and benefited from the utilities. If you have any disputes over liability you should seek advice as the rules are complicated.

Everyone named on the bill is liable not only for their agreed share but for the whole of the bill. This is known as "joint and several liability." The supplier has the right to pursue one or all the tenants named on the bill for the full payment. Joint and several liability overrides any informal agreement between tenants. For example, if one of the tenants named on the bill agrees to pay the whole amount, this is overridden by joint and several liability. All tenants named on the bill can be pursued for non payment the whole amount owing, not just their share.

If your name is not on a bill but you are asked to pay it, please contact the Advice Centre.

PROBLEMS WITH BILLS

You can prevent problems with chasing other tenants for their share of the bill if you;

- Ask for a forwarding address and their parents' or home address. Should you need to send them a letter about their share of the bill, this can make it easier.
- Set up a bank account together and save money each week/month towards the bills.
- Ask for an itemised telephone bill, which shows the number dialled, the date and cost of the call. This can help identify what proportion of the bill each tenant should pay.
- If people move in and out of the property during the tenancy, ask the utility company to change the names on the bills. ensure that the outgoing tenant leaves a forwarding address and money for their share of the bills. The incoming tenant should be added to the names on the bill.

If you receive high bills;

- Ensure that bills are based on actual and not estimated readings. Often estimated bills come with an 'E' next to the reading.
- If you think that the meter is registering fuel use at too high a rate, ask the supplier to check the meter.
- Most suppliers offer schemes to allow you to spread payments across the year or pay at different intervals.

If you want to make a complaint about your supplier, you should firstly contact the company, and then see 'Contacts' for the most appropriate organisation.

ELECTRICITY & GAS

You could be disconnected if you do not arrange and keep to payments. Electricity and gas suppliers must provide a pre-payment meter to prevent you being disconnected. The meter will collect money for the fuel used and towards the arrears owed. You should treat debts for electricity and gas as a priority. Companies can pursue the debt through the County Court. Remember electricity and gas are on-going expenses.

WATER & SEWERAGE

Since 1999, you cannot have your water supply disconnected because of arrears. However, water companies can pursue payment through the

County Court. You should contact your supplier and look at ways of making payments to arrears and for future bills. Remember water is an on-going expense. You may be able to apply to the Yorkshire or Severn Trent Water Trust for financial help. (See Contacts.)

TELEPHONE

Your telephone may be disconnected if you do not keep to agreed payments. Telephone companies can pursue payment through the County Court. Whether or not the telephone is a priority for you depends on your circumstances, but in most cases it is not a priority debt. If you have problems paying the bill you could consider changing to incoming calls only. If you have a mobile you may want to consider changing to a cheaper tariff or to 'Pay As You Go'.

If you cannot pay a bill, it is important to seek advice as soon as possible. The Advice Centre can assist with negotiations with suppliers and help you make a payment plan.

TV LICENSES

If you live in accommodation where you share communal facilities, including the lounge, you will be responsible for buying a license. One license should cover the whole house, and include TVs in tenants' bedrooms. However, if your house is divided into bedsits or flats, or you have an individual tenancy for your room, you need your own licence for a TV in your room. *(NB Even if you don't have a TV, you need to be covered by a valid TV License if you watch or record TV as it's being broadcast. This includes the use of devices such as a computer, laptop, mobile phone or DVD/video recorder)*

It is likely that your tenancy agreement will have a clause that states the tenants and not the landlord are responsible for purchasing a TV license. You can be fined and prosecuted in the Magistrates Court if you do not buy a TV License.

INTERNET

Not all tenancy agreements specifically mention internet charges, so it is important to clarify with the landlord who is liable when you move in.

Internet charges are similar to telephone charges. If more than one person uses your internet supply, you need to come to an agreement about how to pay the bill.

You may prefer to set up an internet / television / telephone package. Research which provider is the cheapest; and remember that you may

need to compromise in order to find a package that suits everyone in the house.

MOVING OUT

Use the sheet at the back to help note meter readings and tenants' addresses

You should contact each supplier before you leave the property to;

- check that they are aware you are moving out
- give a forwarding address for final bills
- give a final meter reading
- terminate your contract if you have one. You may have to pay a termination fee.

If you make a phone call, follow this up with a letter and keep a copy. This provides proof of notice, should you have any problems in the future.

If you do find that you have any problems with your Utility Bills, then contact the Advice Centre as soon as possible.

CONTACTS

Advice Centre

The HUBS
Paternoster Row
Sheffield
S1 2QQ
Tel: 0114 225 4148
Fax: 0114 225 4943
Email: advicecentre@shu.ac.uk
Web: www.hallamunion.org/advice

Water

Yorkshire Water

Tel: 0845 124 2424

Yorkshire Water Community Trust (for financial help)

www.ywct.org.uk
Tel: 0845 124 24 26

Consumer Council for Water

Complaints about water providers

Tel: 0845 708 9368

www.ccwater.org.uk

Email: yorkshire@ccwater.org.uk

Electricity

A list of companies and links to contact details can be found here:
www.electricity-guide.org.uk/companies

Consumer Direct

Complaints about electricity suppliers
Tel: 0845 404 0506
www.consumerdirect.gov.uk

Gas

A list of gas companies and contact details can be found here:
www.gas-guide.org.uk/companies

Gas Emergencies

National emergency number: **0800 111 999**

Consumer Direct

Complaints about gas suppliers
Tel: 0845 404 0506
www.consumerdirect.gov.uk

Telephone

OFCOM

Complaints about phone service providers
Tel: 0300 123 3333
Email: contact@ofcom.org.uk
www.ofcom.org.uk/complain

TV Licence

TV License Regional Centre (north)

Tel: 0844 800 5870 for general enquiries & direct debits.

UTILITY BILL CHECK LIST

DATE - MOVED IN	
Electricity Meter Reading	
Gas Meter Reading	

DATE - MOVED OUT	
Electricity Meter Reading	
Gas Meter Reading	

Contact Water:

Contact Telephone Supplier:

Contact Internet Provider:

Contact TV Licensing:

See 'Contacts' for phone numbers and email contacts

National gas emergency number: 0800 111 999

Name of First Tenant:

Home Address:

Name of Second Tenant:

Home Address:

Name of Third Tenant:

Home Address:

Name of Fourth Tenant:

Home Address:

Name of Fifth Tenant:

Home Address: