

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

Water Metering Your New Rights

From 1 April 2000 you have new rights over how you are charged for water for your home.

This information tells you:

- what your new rights are;
- how they have changed; and
- how they might benefit you.

Water Charges

Water companies provide water and sewerage services to nearly every home in England and Wales. Customers pay water charges to the companies. An independent regulator (the Office of Water Services - "Ofwat") already limits how much companies may charge in total. But until now the water companies have been able to say whether you would have a water meter or not.

Now a new law - the Water Industry Act 1999 - gives you a say in whether or not you are charged by water meter in your home.

A metered or an unmetered charge?

Most homes have their water and sewerage charges set in one of two ways:

- an **unmetered charge**, based on the property, usually its former rateable value; or
- a **metered charge**, based on a water meter reading.

Which is the lower bill, metered or unmetered? It depends on your home and how much water you use, for example:

- a small family in a home with a high rateable value might pay less on a meter;
- a large family in a home with a low rateable value might pay less without a meter.

Your right to an unmetered charge

You will have the right to continue paying an unmetered charge provided that you meet the following conditions.

- You are already paying an unmetered charge.

- The charge is for your home.
- Your home is not a minor part of a building with another use (such as a business).
- You carry on living at the same address.
- You are not using water from the mains for any of these purposes:
 - watering a garden (unless you simply water by hand, such as by a watering can or a hand-held hose);
 - filling a pond or swimming pool bigger than 10,000 litres with an automatic refill;
 - filling an extra-large bath (bigger than 230 litres - a normal bath is only 80 litres);
 - a power shower; or
 - a water softener using reverse osmosis.
- You are not in an area declared as water scarce. At the moment (April 2000) there are no such areas.

If you do not meet all the points on this list you will not necessarily have to pay a metered charge. It only means that the water company could decide that you should.

If you do have the right to an unmetered charge, it does not prevent water companies fitting meters or require them to take out existing meters. But it means they cannot set your charge according to a meter reading.

Your right to a metered charge

From 1 April 2000 you will also have the right to pay a metered water charge for your home if you wish. You can ask your water company to install a water meter free of charge.

When asked, water companies will have to fit meters within a promised timescale. If they fail, they should offer an alternative charge until metering begins.

Companies do not have to fit a meter if it is too difficult or would cost too much. If this is the case when you ask for a metered charge, the water company will explain why and what alternatives are available.

After you have opted for a metered charge, you will have at least 12 months in which to change your mind. If you do, you must notify the water company and your charge will go back to being unmeasured.

Help with high measured charges

If

- you pay a metered charge;
- someone in your household is on benefit or tax credit; and
- your household uses a lot of extra water because that person has three or more children, or has a particular medical condition

then you might qualify for help.

To find out more, read the companion leaflet: "Water Metering: Help for people receiving benefits of tax credits".

Tenants

All these new rights are available to tenants as they are to other water customers. Landlords may not use tenancy agreements to stop tenants who pay their own water bills from choosing their method of charging.

Further information

These are your minimum legal rights. Water companies may decide to give customers more choice than the legal minimum.

Each water company has to follow the new laws on charges. All their charges, and their rules on matters such as water meters, must be set out in a charges scheme and approved by the Office of Water Services.

This information gives a general outline of the new rights. If you want to know more about water charges in your area, please contact your water company. Their customer service phone number should be on your water bill.

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