A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO ENERGY

Everything you need to know about paying your energy bill and keeping it low

severn wye

How much you need to worry about your energy bill will largely depend on where you're living

Energy prices have increased by a whopping 64% compared to winter 2021. As a student, how much you need to worry about your energy bill will depend on where you're living and how you pay your rent and bills.

Living in university-owned accommodation?
You probably don't need to worry as the fees you've signed up for won't change this academic year. But unless you're planning on staying in halls forever, it's worth reading on.

Renting from a student letting agent off-campus?
Your bills are probably included in the rent you pay and it's unlikely you'll be subject to a fair usage policy (but it's a good idea to check your tenancy agreement, just in case).

You're most likely to be affected by energy price increases if you rent privately.

Bills included in the rent?
You should be protected from price increases for the duration of your contract. Check your tenancy agreement for something called a 'fair usage policy.' If you've agreed to a policy like this, there might be a maximum amount of energy you're allowed to use included in the rent. This maximum might be units of energy used, or a proportion of the rent. If it's a proportion of your rent, be careful: high energy costs might mean you go over this more quickly than you expect.

If there is a policy like this on your agreement, check what it says about excess charges, which are charges you might end up paying if you use more than you're 'allowed.' If you go over this limit, your landlord might be able to deduct money from your deposit.

Pay your energy bills separately?
You will be affected by the price increases and will have to keep a close eye on how much energy you're using. The energy price guarantee brought in by the UK Government has capped unit prices of energy, but it hasn't capped the overall amount you can be charged. There's no maximum bill: if you use more you'll pay for more. Keep an eye on what you're using by taking meter readings every month and try to save energy wherever you can (read on for some ways to get started).

Moving on: things to consider when signing a new tenancy agreement

When the time comes to look for your next place, there are some essential energy issues to consider.

Who pays the bill?

If your rent doesn't include bills, someone in the house will have to take responsibility for each of your utility bills, including energy (usually gas, electric or both). This person will be responsible for paying the bill, with the money paid from their bank account. Whether you pay monthly by direct debit or by quarterly payments, you'll have to make sure this person has the money in their account before the bill is due. This will be especially important if your energy bill is high, as it could have a big impact on their bank balance.

Talking about bills can be challenging, especially when everyone is worried about money. Set aside some time to have an open conversation with your housemates when you first move in. Discuss how you want the bill splitting to work, when your bills will be due and how much you'll all be contributing. Talking about this stuff early on can prevent problems further down the line. Remember that you're all in the same boat and talking about money is always difficult, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it!

If you're struggling to figure out your household finances, there are apps that can help you do this.

Every month or every three months?

Whether you pay monthly by direct debit or in quarterly instalments will also have an impact on the amount you pay. It's usually cheaper and easier to pay by direct debit, as you'll pay an estimated annual amount which is spread over the year in equal payments. This means that even though you'll use more energy in winter (because the heating will be on and it gets darker earlier), you'll still pay the same amount each month. If you pay quarterly, you're likely to pay more when you use more, and less when you use less, which means you'll have to find varying sums of money at different times of the year, regardless of your income.

Prepayment meter and key

Topping up the meter

Some properties have a prepayment meter which needs 'topping up.' Paying for your energy this way is more expensive and you have to keep an eye on what's left on the meter so you don't run out of credit. If you take turns, make sure you keep a record of whose turn it is to top up!

Reading your meter

However you pay for your energy, you'll have a meter recording how much you're using. This could be a traditional meter (usually a box with rotating dials that show the units of energy you're using) or a smart meter, which comes with a digital display and a monitor to use inside. These monitors show you what you're using in units, but also in pounds and pence. If you choose a house that doesn't have a smart meter, you could ask your landlord about getting one installed. Most energy companies will install one for free.

Traditional meter

Smart meter

- If you don't have a smart meter, make sure you submit monthly meter readings to your supplier (you can usually to this via your supplier's website or app). Your bills will be more accurate and you'll know how much energy you're using and whether you need to cut down. Taking a photo of the meter is a good idea, so you have a dated record of your use.
- You might have an electricity meter with two sets of dials (usually labelled normal and low, or day and night). This is something called an Economy 7 tariff, which charges different rates for electricity depending on the time of day (it's usually cheaper overnight).

Scan for our guide to reading your meter

Scan to learn more about smart meters

Practical ways to save energy

If you're not sure how to get started, here are some simple ways you can save energy around the house. Saving energy basically means saving money. The less energy you use, the less you're paying for.

Programme your heating

If you have a programmable thermostat, make sure you know how it works and you're using it! Making sure your heating is programmed means it will only come on when it's needed. For example, keep the heating off overnight and when no one is at home. If you're not sure how to programme it, you should be able to find manuals for most thermostats online.

Turn down your thermostat

Try 18°C in areas you don't use much (like bathrooms and hallways) and up to 21°C in your living areas. It's really tempting to have a cosy, warm room all day, but now you're paying for your energy bill, it's worth turning down the heat when you can. Avoid using plug-in heaters as they are expensive to run. If you feel like you need a plug-in heater because your room is cold, check your radiators are working. If they feel cold at the top but warm at the bottom they might need bleeding, so call your landlord!

Reduce the flow temperature of your boiler

If you have a combination or condensing boiler (a boiler that doesn't have a separate hot water tank), this is the temperature of the water that goes to your radiators, and it's often set higher than it needs to be. 55°C or point '3' on your boiler's dial is a good place to start. Head to our website for a guide to the process.

Set your thermostatic radiator valves (TRVs)

Set the TRVs (the dials on your radiators) to be lower in rooms you don't use often (bathrooms, hallways etc) and make sure they're not covered.

Turn things off

Get into the habit of turning off appliances and lighting that you're not using. Turn lights off when you go out of the room or during the day and don't leave appliances like bathroom extractor fans on for long periods as they use a lot of energy.

Check for vampires

Ok, not real vampires. They're OK. But vampire devices are appliances that drain energy even when you're not using them. If any of your devices (or their plugs/leads) feel hot to the touch, or have a digital display or a standby light, they are probably best switched off at the wall.

Shrink your bills, not your clothes

Ninety percent of a washing machine's energy is spent heating the water, so wash your clothes at 30–40°C instead. This will help look after your clothes for longer and save you money. Make sure you only ever wash a full load (otherwise you're just wasting energy) and learn to use the settings on your machine correctly. Unless your washing is covered in mud from the rugby pitch or makeup from last night's trip up town, a short wash at 30–40°C is usually enough.

Save in the kitchen

Microwaves are much more efficient than ovens, and full dishwashers are more efficient than washing by hand. Boil only as much water as you need for your cuppa. Oh, and you'll be pleased to know that a fridge uses less energy when it's full – so make sure it's stocked with beverages.

Cook together

Depending on how well you gel with your housemates, consider cooking together, even if it's only once or twice a week. This will help you save on your food bill and your energy, as having the oven or hob going several times a day will really add up.

Try to reduce your shower time by 30–60 seconds

It's easy to zone out in the shower, but long showers use a lot of energy, especially when it might be running several times a day. If you're a fan of baths, consider either having less or ditching them altogether (for now), as showers are cheaper.

In a warmth emergency, heat the person

If you're struggling to afford to keep your house warm or you're at home for long periods during the day, consider buying a heated blanket or other personal warming device (such as hand warmers or a heated bodywarmer). Be careful if you switch the heating off for a long time: keep an eye out for any signs of damp and clean any mould that appears.

Scan for more energy advice,
including our 101 ways to save energy

If you're based in Gloucestershire or South Gloucestershire and you'd find it helpful to talk to someone about the guidance in this leaflet (or about energy in general), you can call our free adviceline on 0800 500 3076, and chat to one of our friendly energy experts. Lines are open Monday to Friday, 9–5pm.

0800 500 3076

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