

# ***Fuel Poverty Action Guide***



A practical guide to help MPs, local authority councillors and advice workers answer queries on energy bills, heating, home insulation and energy efficiency.

February 2010

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# Foreword

As one of the UK's leading energy companies and supplier to over 5 million customers, EDF Energy has always taken our responsibility to our most vulnerable customers very seriously. As such, we have led the industry in developing initiatives to support our customers most likely to be living in fuel poverty.

In 2006, we were the first energy supplier to introduce a social tariff, and today we have over 160,000 customers on our special discounted Energy Assist tariff which offers them our cheapest enduring tariff. Customers on Energy Assist are also offered a free benefit entitlement check, to ensure that they are receiving all the benefits to which they are entitled, and energy efficiency advice so that we tackle all three causes of fuel poverty: low incomes, poor property condition and energy costs. We were pleased when the competition followed our example and launched their own social tariffs so that today, over a million British energy customers are getting help from their supplier.

Constituents, when looking for help, are often faced with a confusing array of offers which vary between suppliers and are often targeted at different groups: this is why EDF Energy has long campaigned for mandatory tariff support from suppliers. We therefore welcome the introduction, proposed in the recent Energy Bill, for Mandatory Tariff Support, which will require all suppliers to offer a similar type of support to groups prioritised and, we hope, identified by Government as being in greatest need.

In the meantime, EDF Energy is delighted to sponsor fuel poverty charity National Energy Action (NEA)'s efforts to raise awareness of fuel poverty on the 12th of February, and to produce this guide as an information tool for MPs. We know how complicated the issues you face are in trying to advise constituents and I very much hope that this Fuel Poverty Action Guide will provide a useful and invaluable resource.

Martin Lawrence  
Managing Director  
Energy Sourcing and Customer Supply  
EDF Energy

## About NEA

National Energy Action (NEA) is a national charity with the primary aim of ending fuel poverty for all households in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. NEA seeks to achieve this objective through a wide range of activities including campaigning work, policy development, implementation of practical programmes and training and advice services.

### Campaigning and policy work:

- NEA seeks to influence the political process at local, regional and national level by making well researched and informed representations on the causes and consequences of fuel poverty and on the policies and programmes required to remedy the problem.

### Practical projects:

- NEA has sought to identify practical solutions to fuel poverty through innovative projects demonstrating the potential of heating and insulation programmes, quality energy advice and use of renewable and alternative technologies to provide affordable warmth.
- NEA offers authoritative and expert training to organisations and individuals providing advice, guidance and information to energy consumers and, in particular, to disadvantaged consumers.

### The causes and symptoms of fuel poverty

This guide is intended to assist Members of Parliament, local authority councillors and advice workers in identifying fuel and other

energy problems and to provide information and guidance on how to resolve these problems.

It considers the most common areas of concern for domestic energy consumers and describes their rights and entitlements, and the agencies available to assist them.

This guide describes practical action to alleviate fuel poverty, to benefit the health and well-being of constituents and to increase their disposable income. Also contained within the guide are details of the specialist agencies to which constituents can be referred.

The causes of fuel poverty are inadequate thermal insulation, inefficient and uneconomic heating systems, low household income, and high fuel prices. The consequence is that millions of households cannot afford sufficient warmth for health and comfort.

However, fuel poverty can often be a complex problem and there may be a range of different actions that can be taken to improve the circumstances of a constituent or client.



*Campaigning for Warm Homes*

## Identifying the Problem

Individuals will not identify themselves as suffering from fuel poverty.

Instead they will often highlight a range of problems that could be signs of fuel poverty.

### Common complaints are:

- I can't pay my electricity/gas bill
- I'm about to be disconnected
- I can't afford to heat my home
- My house is cold
- My house is damp
- I'm always ill

### Solutions

Ensure client is on the best payment option



Go to section 1  
Paying for energy

Check availability of welfare benefits



Go to section 2  
Maximising income

Check availability of grant to improve insulation and energy efficiency in the home



Go to section 3  
Warmer homes

Discuss potential for saving money by switching suppliers(s)



Go to section 4  
Switching suppliers



## Section 1

### Paying for Energy

Difficulties in paying for gas and electricity and the threat of disconnection can be a symptom of fuel poverty, although they may also be caused by an unexpectedly high bill. The long-term solution lies in improved heating and insulation standards. In the short-term, however, it is necessary to consider the support and protection available to those customers in difficulty with their fuel bills.

#### Action

If the bill is unexpectedly high, advise the client to contact the gas or electricity supplier to have the meter read or to provide their 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.

#### Contacting the energy supplier

Energy suppliers will work with customers to find solutions to payment difficulties but they can only do this if they are alerted to the problem. Where customers cannot afford to pay their bill, the priority is to contact the energy supplier as soon as possible to agree a payment plan. It should be remembered that:

- Ability to pay is the main criterion in working out affordable repayment of debt
- People can be over-optimistic about their ability to repay debt and should be encouraged to pay only what they can reasonably afford. Clearing the debt reduces worry and allows consumers more choice of supplier, but it is essential that they do not commit themselves to

unrealistic levels of repayment

- Energy suppliers offer special payment plans to help those in debt, often with an extremely low debt recovery level.

### **Energy suppliers and customers in difficulty**

Energy suppliers must follow procedures laid down by the regulator in dealing with vulnerable and disadvantaged customers. These include:

- Offering a wide range of payment methods
- Following strict procedures for dealing with customers in difficulty in order to prevent disconnection from supply.
- All of the main energy suppliers offer some form of social tariff aimed primarily at their most vulnerable customers. These offerings generally involve some form of discount on energy bills.

Customers must not be disconnected if:

- a payment arrangement is kept to or a prepayment meter is installed
- the supplier is aware that there are young children or elderly residents or other vulnerable persons in the home

### **Explore other payment options**

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 before deciding on what is the most appropriate method.

For example, although a prepayment meter may work as a budgeting aid for some consumers, it can also be more costly and

there is a risk of being left without a fuel supply if the key or card cannot be charged for any reason.

On the other hand, whilst direct debit generally offers the lowest fuel costs and can be extremely convenient, there is a possibility that there may be insufficient funds to meet the agreed monthly payments and the household will incur bank charges. Households without a bank account cannot enter into a direct debit arrangement.

The table on page 8 illustrates the main advantages and disadvantages associated with the most common payment arrangements.



Payment Type		Advantages	Disadvantages	Who it would suit
<p><b>Weekly / Fortnightly / Monthly budget payments</b></p> <p><b>Card meter / Token meter / Key meter</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small payments on a regular basis (usually made using a payment card)</li> <li>• Pay for energy as it is used and so no large bills</li> <li>• Can budget according to means</li> <li>• Debt reduces by a set amount each week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possible inconvenience and travelling costs to reach payment agents</li> <li>• Some Post Offices and banks may charge for use of this facility to make payments</li> <li>• Can be a more expensive way to pay for fuel since some suppliers impose higher charges for this payment method.</li> <li>• Limited number of payment agents</li> <li>• Possible inconvenience and travelling costs to reach payment agents</li> <li>• Customers need to understand how standing charges and debts are taken through the meter so that they know their available credit</li> <li>• If credit runs out there is limited emergency credit before supply is disconnected</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Households without bank accounts</li> <li>• Households repaying debts</li> <li>• Those who want a prepayment meter fitted and don't find access to payment agents a problem</li> <li>• Customers who want to avoid getting into debt or who want to manage an existing debt</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Fuel Direct</b></p> <p>Energy suppliers are required to offer this payment option to customers. However energy companies and the Department for Work and Pensions may be resistant to Fuel Direct arrangements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Payment for current use of energy and debt taken directly out of benefits</li> <li>• Energy expenditure and debt repayment evenly spread</li> <li>• Less expensive for consumers in debt than some other methods (e.g. prepayment meters)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If current consumption is more than the amount deducted from benefit, debt will increase and so will future deductions</li> <li>• No flexibility in budgeting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only for those on Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or Pension Credit who are, or have been, in energy debt</li> <li>• Particularly suitable for those who have difficulty managing their finances.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Monthly or Quarterly Direct Debit / Standing Order</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Payment is the same time and amount every month, which may help with budgeting</li> <li>• With direct debit, once the arrangement has been established there is no need for further action on the customer's part</li> <li>• The direct debit payment method is the easiest for companies to administer, so discounts can be given (highest discount is for on-line direct debit)</li> <li>• Payment amounts can easily be changed to cover changes in levels of consumption</li> <li>• With a Standing Order the customer has more control over payments made</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be paying too much/too little if bills have been estimated</li> <li>• If payments have not been adjusted to cover changes in consumption a balance may be owing which may need to be paid in full at some time during the year</li> <li>• Bank charges may be incurred if payments cannot be claimed due to insufficient funds</li> <li>• When payment amounts need amending on a Standing Order the customer has to contact the bank/building society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Households with regular income</li> <li>• Households with a bank/building society account</li> <li>• Those who want to spread energy costs over the year and avoid high winter fuel charges.</li> </ul>	



## Home Heat Helpline

The six main energy suppliers fund an advice and information service aimed primarily at vulnerable energy consumers or people encountering difficulty in paying their fuel bills. This service is operated on behalf of the industry by the Energy Retail Association.

The Home Heat Helpline is a FREE help line available to anyone who has queries with regards to their energy use.

The Helpline can provide advice on energy efficiency and other ways to reduce fuel bills and can also advise on the most beneficial tariff and payment method offered by the existing supplier.

Specialists advise on benefits, grants for free home insulation, reduced tariffs and special payment options your energy supplier provides to help those struggling with their fuel bills.

The Home Heat Helpline is open 9am-8pm Monday to Friday and 10am-2pm on Saturdays — and is free to call

**Tel: 0800 33 66 99**

Clients could also be referred to the following local agencies who may be able to offer assistance with problems:

- Money Advice Agency
- Citizen Advice Bureau
- Welfare Rights Office

Details of how to contact these agencies should be entered in the appropriate boxes on page 25.

## Special circumstances

If the constituent is elderly, chronically sick or disabled see the special section on support for these customers on page 22.

If the constituent is unhappy about the way they have been treated by their energy company see the *Complaints and Enquiries* section on page 24.





## Section 2 Maximising Income

Low income is one of the main causes of fuel poverty. Part of the long-term solution to fuel poverty lies in ensuring that families and individuals are as financially secure as possible and receiving all the benefits to which they are entitled.

The social security system provides some limited assistance for fuel costs or with fuel-related problems. Generally this help is provided through the Social Fund system of grants, loans and selective payments.

### **Action**

Advise constituent to contact their local office of the Pension Service or Jobcentre Plus, Citizens Advice Bureau, Money Advice Agency or Welfare Rights Office (see contact

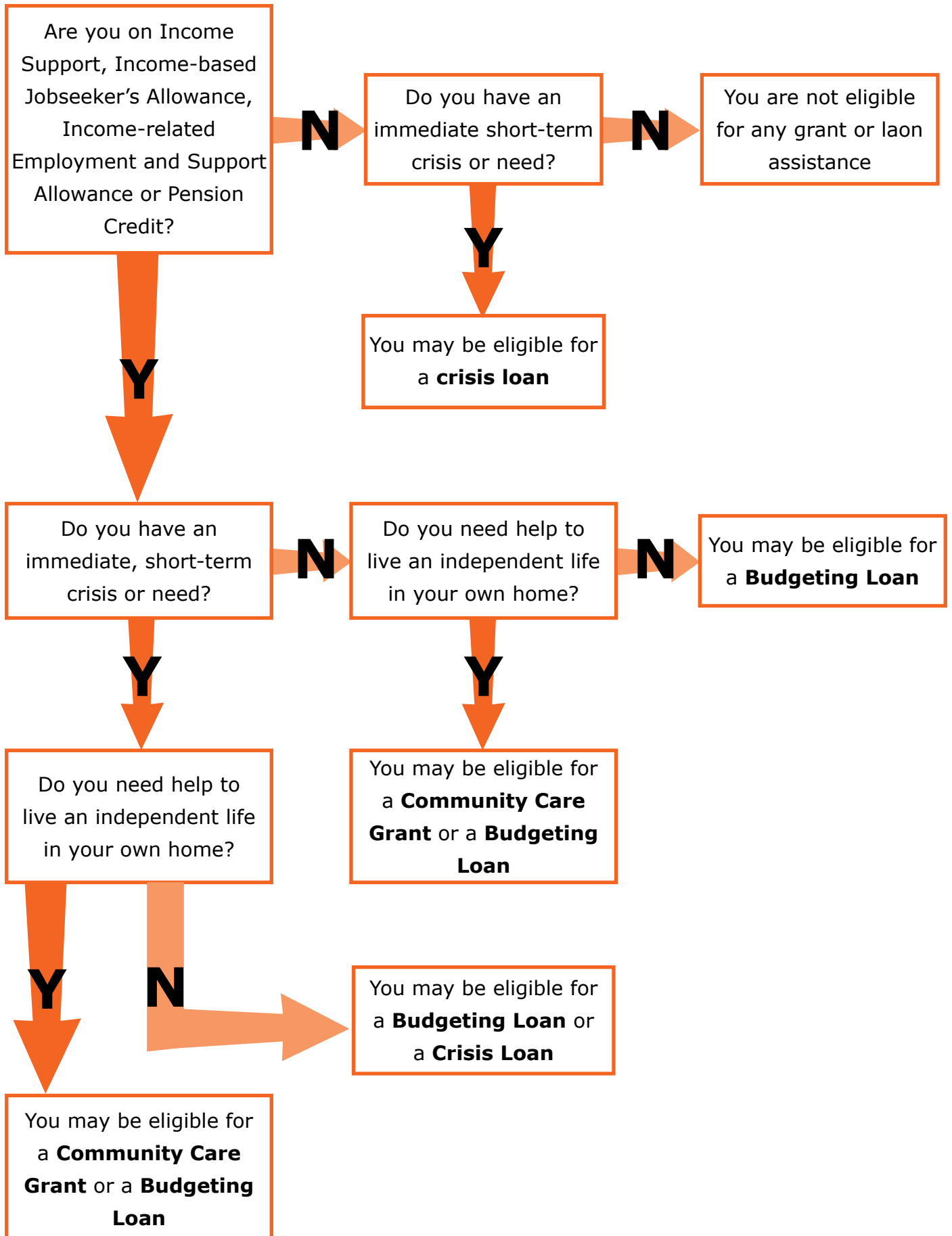
sheet on pages 25-27) to ensure that they are receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. These agencies may also advise on access to other financial services.

Provide the constituent with a copy of the contacts pages at the back of this handbook (pages 25-27).

Take the constituent through the flow charts overleaf to see what financial help is available.

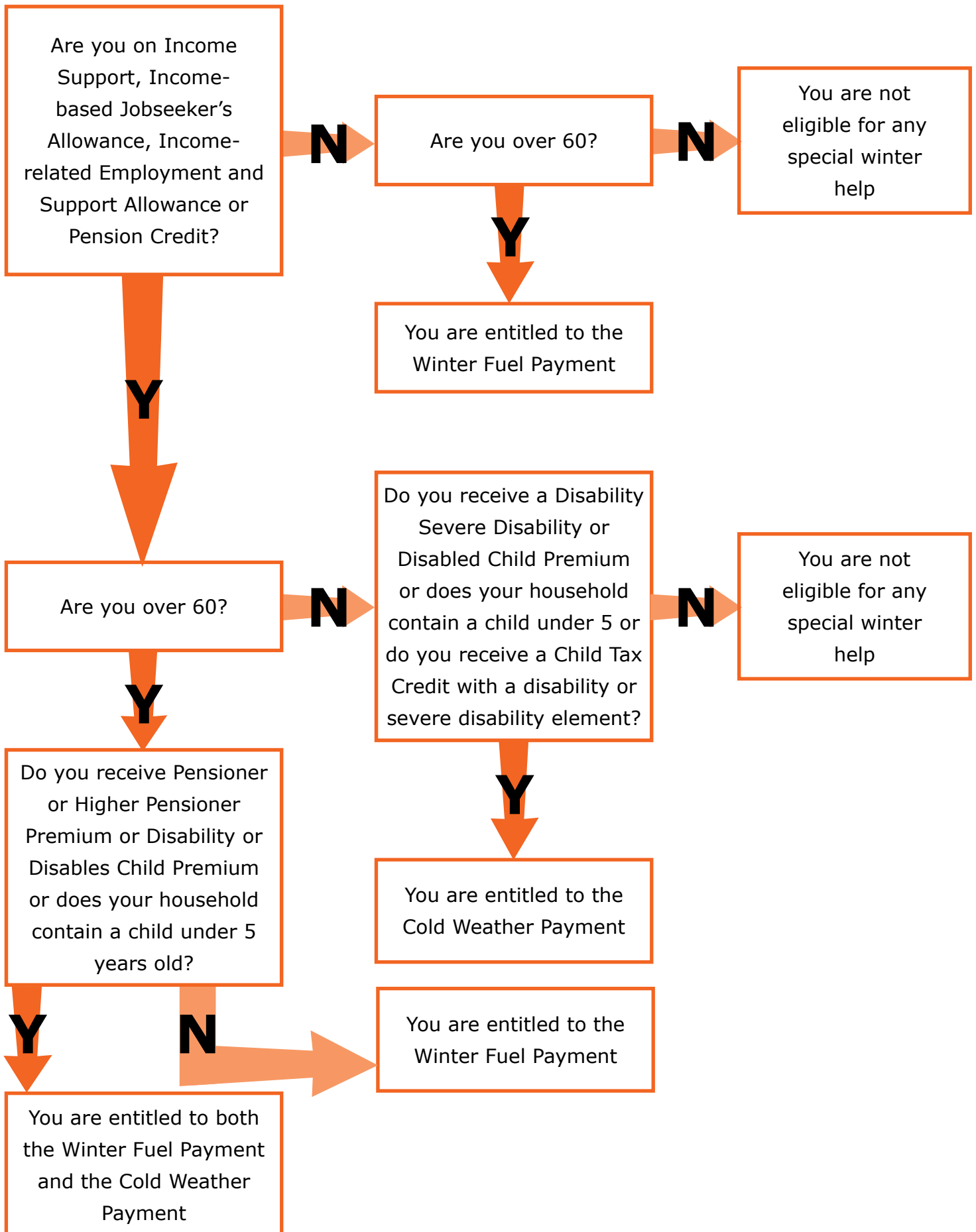
## Flowchart 1

### Can I get a grant or loan to help me with my fuel costs?



## Flowchart 2

### Am I entitled to any help with my fuel bills over the winter?



## Community Care Grants

Community Care Grants are intended to help people live independently in the community. Claimants must be in receipt of Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance or Pension Credit or be likely to receive one of these benefits on leaving care. These grants do not have to be repaid.

The purpose of the grant is to: ease exceptional pressures on families enable someone to resettle or remain in the community.

Fuel costs and standing charges are specifically excluded from Community Care Grants, as are service charges. However a grant maybe paid to cover the costs of cookers and heaters and for fuel connection and reconnection charges. Personal savings of over £500 (£1000 if claimant or partner is aged 60 or over) are taken into account.

**Claims are made in writing to the local Jobcentre Plus office, generally on a specific application form (SF 300).**



## Budgeting Loans

These are interest-free loans intended to help households where a period of dependance on Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Related Employment and Support Allowance or Pension Credit has made budgeting for intermittent expenses difficult. A Budgeting Loan is not available for gas or electricity charges or for standing charges although priority is given to meter installation, reconnection charges and the cost of non-mains fuel such as oil, bottled gas, paraffin and coal. Any Budgeting Loan will be reduced by the amount of personal savings over £1,000 or £2,000 if the applicant or partner is aged 60 or over.

**Claims are made in writing to the local Jobcentre Plus office, generally on a specific application form (SF 500).**

## Crisis Loans

These are interest-free loans to help with an immediate short-term need or crisis. It is not essential to be in receipt of benefit to qualify for a loan.

Fuel arrears are not specifically excluded and a loan may be awarded for the purpose of paying off fuel debt or for reconnection charges.

**Claims can be made in writing or verbally. Written claims are normally submitted on Form SF 401 to the local Jobcentre Plus Office.**

**Claim forms can be downloaded from the Department for Work and Pensions website.**

## Winter Fuel Payments

A Winter Fuel Payment is an annual payment to help people aged 60 and over with the costs of keeping warm during the winter.

If you are aged 60 to 79 and you are entitled to receive a Winter Fuel Payment, you will get either £125 or £250, depending on your circumstances in the qualifying week (20-26 September 2010).

If you are aged 80 or over and you are entitled to a Winter Fuel Payment, you will either get £200 or £400 depending on your circumstances in the qualifying week.

If you do not live in your own home, for example if you are a hospital inpatient or living in residential care, you may not qualify for a payment. In some circumstances it will be necessary to claim.

**To obtain a claim form or to check your eligibility call the Winter Fuel Payments helpline on: 08459 15 15 15**



## Cold Weather Payments

Cold Weather Payments are made to eligible households in an area where a period of 'exceptionally cold weather' has occurred or been forecast to occur. The amount of the payment is £25 for any qualifying week.

A period of cold weather is defined as seven consecutive days during which the average or mean daily temperatures is 0° C or lower.

Eligible households are those:

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

- in receipt of pensioner premium, higher pensioner premium

or

- enhanced pensioner premium

or

- disability premium, severe disability premium or disabled child premium

or

- the household contains a child under five years old

**There is no need to claim since payment should be made automatically.**

Note: If the constituent/client is elderly, chronically sick or disabled see the special section on support for these customers on page 22.



### Section 3 Warmer Homes

The most effective solution to fuel poverty lies in energy efficiency improvements to ensure that the fabric of the dwelling is insulated to as high a standard as possible, and that the heating provision is efficient and economic.

Some dwellings may only require simple, common-sense measures to make a difference and in such cases basic energy advice may be all that is needed. Other dwellings may need more substantial work to help make them energy efficient. In these cases, financial assistance or other practical help may be available.

#### **Advice**

Obtain energy efficiency advice from the energy supplier or contact the local Energy Efficiency Advice Centre (see below).

Even comparatively basic improvements may make the difference between fuel poverty and affordable energy costs, and advice is widely available.

All major suppliers of gas and/or electricity to domestic customers are required to provide advice and information on the efficient use of energy.



Information from energy companies is available by calling the relevant number as follows:

Energy supplier	Contact number
<b>British Gas</b>	<b>0800 072 8629</b>
<b>EdF Energy</b>	<b>0800 0969966</b>
<b>RWE npower</b>	<b>0800 022220</b>
<b>Eon Powergen</b>	<b>0500 201000</b>
<b>ScottishPower</b>	<b>0800 332233</b>
<b>Scottish &amp; Southern Energy</b>	<b>0845 7776633</b>

### Energy Efficiency Advice Centres

A network of Energy Efficiency Advice Centres established by the Energy Saving Trust has now achieved total coverage of Great Britain. Householders have access to free, independent energy advice through a freephone service: **0800 512012**

### Practical Help

Discuss the client's circumstances to identify grants or loans that may be available. Help the constituent to make contact with the relevant body and get the practical help they need

There are several sources of practical assistance for domestic energy efficiency improvements, although eligibility may depend on household income, housing tenure, age or disability.

Eligible households may receive grants for heating and/or insulation improvements from the company that supplies their gas or electricity or through the Government's Warm Front scheme in England and equivalent programmes in the devolved administrations.





## Warm Front

Warm Front is the main Government-funded scheme to tackle fuel poverty in England.

Eligibility	Tenure	Measures	Contact
Householder or partner receives a means-tested benefit and household contains a child under 16 years (or maternity certificate MAT B1 has been issued)	Private sector tenants and owner-occupiers only	Heating and insulation measures to a maximum value of £3,500 (£6,000 where oil-fired heating is installed)	National freephone number <b>0800 316 2805</b>
Householder or spouse receives a disability-related benefit			
Householder or spouse receives a means-tested benefit and is over 60			

## Carbon Emissions Reduction Target (CERT)

All energy suppliers are required to achieve carbon reduction targets as specified by the energy regulator, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem). Over the period 2008-2011 around £3.2 billion will be invested in domestic energy efficiency improvements with some £1.9 billion spent on Priority Group customers. The Priority Group comprises households in receipt of certain means-tested or disability-related benefits or where the householder or partner is aged 70 or over.

Carbon Emissions Reduction Target		
Eligibility	Tenure	Measures
All households	All households	Schemes can include heating and insulation work, low energy lighting and energy efficient appliances
Priority Group	All households	As above, however Priority Group customers will not generally be required to contribute towards the cost of works

Householders wishing to enquire about offers currently available should contact their energy supplier or their local Energy Efficiency Advice Centre on 0800 512 012

## Contact details

Energy companies can be contacted about their CERT programmes via the numbers listed on page 16.



## Section 4 Switching Suppliers

Energy prices are likely to stay high which means any action to reduce household fuel bills will have a beneficial effect on fuel poverty. In the competitive market, savings can often be made by switching to another electricity and/or gas supplier. This should be a relatively easy process but some people may find it confusing. The key to making switching easier is gaining access to good quality, independent information.

### **Action**

All energy suppliers have agreed to offer some form of preferential pricing arrangement to help some of their most vulnerable customers. Check with the supplier for details of the benefits on offer and the eligibility criteria.

Gas and electricity markets in Great Britain have been fully competitive since 1999. This means all householders have a choice of gas and electricity supplier. Customers who have never switched supplier are most likely to be able to reduce their bills significantly but most consumers can reduce their existing fuel costs if they shop around to get the best deal.

Some utility companies also offer specific energy packages tailored to meet the needs of particular sections of the community. These may, for example, comprise rebates, discounted charges or fixed rate tariffs.

## Obtain information so that accurate price comparisons can be made

Suppliers must give accurate advice to enquirers about savings they offer, although they will need information about the household's energy consumption. Customers should ask about both gas and electricity (savings on one fuel may be outweighed by charges on another) and about total bills (the advantage of no standing charge may be outweighed by higher unit prices).

There are a number of officially accredited price comparison sites that enable consumers to enter data about their energy consumption and preferred payment methods in order to identify potential savings on fuel bills.

### Comparative energy prices can be found at:

- [www.saveonyourbills.co.uk](http://www.saveonyourbills.co.uk)
- [www.unravelit.com](http://www.unravelit.com)
- [www.theenergyshop.com](http://www.theenergyshop.com)
- [www.moneyexpert.com/energy](http://www.moneyexpert.com/energy)
- [www.uswitch.com](http://www.uswitch.com)
- [www.switchwithwhich.co.uk](http://www.switchwithwhich.co.uk)
- [www.moneysupermarket.com](http://www.moneysupermarket.com)
- [www.ukpower.co.uk](http://www.ukpower.co.uk)
- [www.energylinx.co.uk](http://www.energylinx.co.uk)
- [www.confused.com](http://www.confused.com)
- [www.energyhelpline.com](http://www.energyhelpline.com)

Accredited switching sites have the advantage of being constantly updated and so the information should always be reliable and current. However one alternative is to use the price comparison tables published on the Consumer Focus website. These will give an indication of potential financial savings but may not always be completely up to date. Consequently, information should be checked

with the relevant supplier or with a switching website.

<http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk>

N.B. Switching sites may not contain information about any discounted tariffs offered to certain categories of vulnerable customer by energy suppliers. Normally these tariffs are only open to existing customers but further information can be found by contacting the supplier:

Energy supplier	Contact number
<b>British Gas</b>	<b>0800 072 7100</b>
<b>EdF Energy</b>	<b>0800 269 450</b>
<b>RWE npower</b>	<b>0800 975 1373</b>
<b>Eon Powergen</b>	<b>0845 300 4382</b>
<b>ScottishPower</b>	<b>0845 2700 700</b>
<b>Scottish &amp; Southern Energy</b>	<b>0800 622 838</b>

**Note:** If a client is unhappy with the way they have been treated during the process of switching supplier, or if there is any other area of disagreement with an energy company, they can complain to the Energy Ombudsman. Contact details are below:

Energy Ombudsman

PO Box 966

Warrington

WA4 9DF

Tel.: 0330 440 1624 or 01925 530 263

or 0845 055 0760

Fax: 0330 440 1625 or 01925 530 264

Textphone: 0330 440 1600 or 0845 051 1513

Telephone lines are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

Email: [enquiries@energy-ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@energy-ombudsman.org.uk)

## The process of switching

Once a new supplier has been chosen the procedure is as follows:

### 1. Agree a contract

A contract with the new supplier must be agreed before arrangements to supply gas or electricity can be made. The contract can be agreed either at home or over the telephone. Some suppliers will also allow the customer to sign up over the internet. The process to transfer supply from one company to another can take between three to six weeks, or longer if problems occur. The new supplier will keep the client informed of progress.

### 2. Cooling-off period

When any contract is signed to switch supplier there is, by law, a seven-day cooling-off period. All suppliers should phone or write to the customer to make sure it is understood that a contract has been entered into and that the customer is happy with the way the sale was made. If not, then the customer has the right to cancel the contract.

### 3. Tell the existing supplier

If the existing supplier is not informed of the proposed change, they may block the transfer. This can be done in writing and many companies will also allow this to be done by telephone. NB. 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 recovered before a transfer will be allowed.

### 4. Pay any outstanding bills

Any outstanding bills with the existing supplier should be paid, otherwise the supplier may block the transfer. Any Direct Debits or

Standing Orders set up to pay your existing supplier should be cancelled.

### 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. A note should be kept of the reading in case of



## Appendix A Getting Legal Help

any future dispute.

Anyone renting their home, whether in the private sector or social sector, is entitled to a warm and healthy environment. However, in some cases there may be problems if the landlord will not take the necessary measures to provide affordable warmth.

The Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) was introduced by the Housing Act 2004 and acts as an objective measure to assess housing standards. The HHSRS places considerable emphasis on the need for a warm and healthy living environment and, consequently, reasonable standards of heating and insulation.

In many cases, however, landlords, whether private or public sector, will be reluctant to take expensive remedial action to resolve the heating, insulation and ventilation problems that cause fuel poverty and cold, damp housing.

In such cases, tenants may feel compelled to initiate action involving technical and/or legal intervention.

The following agencies may be helpful for legal and technical advice on housing matters:

### Community Legal Service

Source of legal advice and guidance on all matters including housing issues. Clients eligible for legal aid can contact Community Legal Advice via the telephone number or website below.

Tel: 0845 345 4345

<http://www.communitylegaladvice.org.uk/>

**The Law Centres Federation (LCF)** can provide details of local law centres for access to advice and guidance on housing issues.

Law Centres Federation

22 Tudor Street,

London,

EC4Y 0AY

Tel: 020 7842 0720

[www.lawcentres.org.uk](http://www.lawcentres.org.uk)

**AdviceUK** (formerly the Federation of Independent Advice Centres)

AdviceUK does not provide advice direct but can refer on to many different specialist advice agencies across the United Kingdom.

Head Office, 6th Floor,

63 St Mary Axe,

London,

EC3A 8AA

Tel: 020 7469 5700

<http://www.adviceuk.org.uk/>



## Appendix B Elderly, Disabled or Chronically Sick Customers

### Special services

Householders who meet any of the criteria set out below can apply for inclusion on their energy supplier's Priority Service Register:

- pensionable age
- disabled
- chronically sick
- sight or hearing difficulties.

### Services available through the Priority Service Register

- *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 5. If the gas supply must be turned off for safety reasons, and all adults in the home are eligible for the Priority Service 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 companies will consider moving the meter, free of charge, to a more convenient position.
- *Password protection scheme.* Energy companies and customers can agree a personal password for use by company staff when they visit the home. In this way, customers will be protected from bogus callers pretending to be representatives of the gas/electricity company.
- *Quarterly meter readings*  
Some companies 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*  
Companies 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*  
Companies 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 PSR during the winter months (1 October - 31 March).

## Appendix C

### Health and Safety

The main health and safety hazard related to domestic fuel use concerns ventilation and the possible danger of carbon monoxide poisoning. Carbon monoxide (CO) can be given off by appliances that burn gas, oil, coal or wood. This can happen if the appliance is faulty, the room is not properly ventilated or the chimney/flue is blocked.

#### **Danger signs are:**

- gas flames burning orange or yellow instead of the normal blue
- soot stains on or above the appliance
- coal or wood fires that burn slowly or go out.

#### **Actions to take:**

- appliances should be checked for safety every year by a competent person. Gas appliances should only be checked by Gas Safe (official body for gas safety in GB and the Isle of Man) engineers
- the property must be properly ventilated – vents should never be blocked
- chimneys and flues should be regularly swept and cleaned
- carbon monoxide detectors can be purchased (they should conform to British Standard BS 7860).

#### **Gas leaks**

Transco, the gas pipeline company, is responsible for dealing with gas leaks and emergencies. If there is a smell of gas, the free Transco 24-hour national emergency number should be contacted. (See contact sheet on page 27 for details)

In the event of a suspected gas leak:

- doors and windows should be opened to get rid of any gas
- checks should be made to ensure that the gas supply to an appliance has not been left on unlit or that a pilot light has not gone out
- the supply should be turned off at the mains
- matches or naked flames should never be used
- no electrical switches should be turned on or off (including doorbells).

#### **Annual Gas Safety Check**

Some householders qualify for a free annual safety check on gas appliances and other gas fittings. (see page 22 for details).

If you rent your home, your landlord must ensure that gas fittings and flues are maintained in good order and that gas appliances and flues are checked for safety once in a period of twelve months.

#### **Electricity**

Where there is concern about a safety problem with the meter, cables or other equipment leading into the home, the supplier should be contacted on their emergency telephone number. It will be listed on the bill under Supply Failure. Alternatively, contact the emergency number under 'Electricity' in the telephone directory.

This is also the number to call if the supply of electricity to the home is interrupted. Restoring supply is the responsibility of the local electricity distribution company that maintains the cables and wires supplying electricity to the home. If power is not restored to the home within 18 hours, a claim for a compensation payment can be made. The supplier should be contacted for further information.

## Appendix D Complaints and Enquiries

In the event of a complaint about electricity or gas issues including problems with switching supplier, the first contact should be with the company that currently supplies the gas or electricity – the address and telephone number will be on the bill. Most problems should be capable of quick and simple resolution.

If the company's response is not to the satisfaction of the customer and the dispute cannot be resolved in a satisfactory manner the energy supplier will issue a 'deadlock' letter. Once this letter has been issued the customer can approach the Energy Ombudsman to ask for their involvement in examining the complaint. The customer has six months from issue of the 'deadlock' letter to contact the Energy Ombudsman.

The role of the Energy Ombudsman is to act as an independent broker in disputes between energy suppliers and customers including:

- problems with billing
- complaints about the switching process
- complaints about sales activities

Energy Ombudsman  
PO Box 966  
Warrington  
WA4 9DF

Tel: 0845 055 0760

Email:  
enquiries@energy-ombudsman.org.uk

## Consumer Focus and Consumer Direct

The energy consumer protection body, energywatch, has now been replaced by Consumer Focus – an agency with a much wider consumer protection remit. Consumer Focus can deal with complaints that have a wider relevance to consumers but does not generally deal with individual enquiries. This role is taken by Consumer Direct which can offer advice and guidance to individual consumers. However, Consumer Focus has a duty to deal with some cases involving vulnerable consumers through its **Extra Help Unit**.

The Consumers, Estate Agents and Redress Act 2007 sets out the new framework for consumer representation:

- Consumer Focus will be required to investigate complaints from energy consumers relating to a disconnection or a threat of disconnection and it will have the power to investigate energy and complaints made by or on behalf of vulnerable consumers.
- Consumer Direct will deliver front line advice to gas and electricity consumers.
- The Regulator is required to set complaint handling standards for energy services that are binding upon service providers.
- Regulated service providers in the energy sector will need to become members of a redress scheme approved by the Regulators.

Consumer Focus:  
4th Floor, Artillery House  
Artillery Row, London  
SW1P 1RT  
Tel: 020 77997900

Consumer Direct: Tel: 08454 040506



## Trading Standards Offices

A major area of concern in the energy market has been unscrupulous practices in marketing – particularly with regard to doorstep selling. Trading Standards Officers have brought successful prosecutions in cases where customers have been induced to sign contracts under the impression that they were simply requesting further information. It is also a criminal offence not to give notice of the statutory seven-day right to cancel any such contract.

Trading Standards Officers have powers under the Trade Description Act 1968 to take action against companies or agents who are responsible for misleading information. The Consumer Protection Act 1987 also authorises Trading Standards Officers to act on inaccurate pricing claims and comparisons.

See the contact sheet on pages 25-27 for details.

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## Contact pages

### Section One - Paying for energy

#### Money Advice Agency

Address:

Tel:

Contact:

#### Citizens Advice Bureau

Address:

Tel:

Contact:

#### Welfare Rights

Address:

Tel:

Contact:

#### Home Heat Helpline

0800 33 66 99

### Section Two - Financial help

#### Pension Credit Application Line

Freephone: 0800 99 1234

To apply for Pension Credit contact the Pension Service

#### Benefit Enquiry Line

Freephone: 0800 88 22 00

Helpline providing benefits advice for people with disabilities and their carers

#### Winter Fuel Payments Helpline

08459 151515

#### Jobcentre Plus

Address:

**Tel: 0845 6060 234**

Contact:

You can also find details of social security benefits through the websites below:

[www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk](http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk)

[www.thepensionservice.gov.uk](http://www.thepensionservice.gov.uk)

## Section Three – Warmer Homes

**Act On Co2 Advice Line**

**0800 512 012**

**Warm Front**

**0800 316 2805**

### Home Improvement Agency

Address:

Tel:

Contact:

### Energy supplier energy efficiency programmes

British Gas	<b>0800 072 8629</b>
EdF Energy	<b>0800 0969966</b>
RWE npower	<b>0800 022220</b>
EON Powergen	<b>0500 201000</b>
ScottishPower	<b>0800 332233</b>
Scottish & Southern Energy	<b>0845 7776633</b>

## Section Four - Switching Suppliers to Save Money

### Accredited websites

- [www.saveonyourbills.co.uk](http://www.saveonyourbills.co.uk)
- [www.unravelit.com](http://www.unravelit.com)
- [www.theenergyshop.com](http://www.theenergyshop.com)
- [www.moneyexpert.com/energy](http://www.moneyexpert.com/energy)
- [www.uswitch.com](http://www.uswitch.com)
- [www.switchwithwhich.co.uk](http://www.switchwithwhich.co.uk)
- [www.moneysupermarket.com](http://www.moneysupermarket.com)
- [www.ukpower.co.uk](http://www.ukpower.co.uk)
- [www.energylinx.co.uk](http://www.energylinx.co.uk)
- [www.confused.com](http://www.confused.com)

Regional price comparison factsheets can be downloaded from the Consumer Focus website:

<http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk>

## Contacts - Getting Legal Help

### Law Centres Federation

22 Tudor Street, London, EC4Y 0AY

Tel: 020 7842 0720 [www.lawcentres.org.uk](http://www.lawcentres.org.uk)

### Community Legal Advice

Tel: 0845 345 4345 [www.communitylegaladvice.org.uk](http://www.communitylegaladvice.org.uk)

### AdviceUK

Head Office, 6th Floor, 63 St Mary Axe, London, EC3A 8AA

Tel: 020 7469 5700 [www.adviceuk.org.uk](http://www.adviceuk.org.uk)

## Contacts - Older households

### Age UK (previously Age Concern)

Address:

Tel:

Contact:

## Contacts - Health and Safety

### Gas

Health & Safety Executive Gas Safety Advice Line

**0800 300 363**

Gas Safe (previously Corgi)

**0800 408 5500**

Transco (gas leaks)

**0800 111 999**

### Solid fuel enquiries – coal and wood

Solid Fuel Association

**0845 6585080**

### Oil enquiries

Oil Firing Technical Association for the Petroleum Industry

**0845 6585080**

## Contacts - Complaints and enquiries

### Trading Standards Office

Address:

Tel:

Contact:

### Consumer Focus

4th Floor, Artillery House, Artillery Row, London, SW1P 1RT

Tel: 020 77997900

### Consumer Direct 08454 040506

### Energy Ombudsman

PO Box 966, Warrington, WA4 9DF

Tel: 0845 055 0760 Email: [enquiries@energy-ombudsman.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@energy-ombudsman.org.uk)



*Campaigning for Warm Homes*



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Company limited by guarantee.  
Registered in England no. 1853927  
Registered office as previous.  
August 2009.

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Pilgrim Street, Newcastle upon Tyne,  
NE1 6SG. Tel: (0191) 261 5677 Fax:  
(0191) 261 6496  
email: [info@nea.org.uk](mailto:info@nea.org.uk)  
website: [www.nea.org.uk](http://www.nea.org.uk).

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