

Q&A: Water meters and you

As the Environment Agency calls for water meters in virtually all homes in England and Wales, we look at some of the issues for consumers.

How does a water meter work?

Most meters use a positive displacement chamber which has a fixed amount of water flowing through it that turns a dial to measure water usage for a household.

Meters are usually installed in the most suitable location determined by the pipe layout, which may be in the road, garden or indoors.

Your local water company will then visit to check your water meter reading and calculate how much to charge, much like gas and electricity meters.

All homes built since 1990 are fitted with water meters. It is estimated about a third of properties have them.

What are the benefits and disadvantages of being on a meter?

The argument in favour of a meter is straightforward: You pay for what you use.

The Consumer Council for Water found customers considered metering to be the fairest billing method, but they still liked to have a choice.

The Environment Agency makes the case that paying per volume is the fairest way to pay and that it gives people an incentive to use less water, benefiting the environment.

" To meter everybody regardless of their circumstances or how many children they have is absolutely a recipe for disaster "
Neil Fishpool, Campaign for Water Justice

It is said homes with meters use on average 10% to 15% less water than those without.

People who cut their water use often find other bills fall as well, as about 40% of energy bills go on heating water for washing dishes and clothes, bathing and showering.

Another benefit is the meter allows you to see whether you have a leak.

Domestic customers are entitled to a "leakage allowance", so you do not have to pay for the water lost through a proven leak, according to the Consumer Council for Water.

Water UK, which represents water companies, said metering also allowed the possibility to introduce more adapted tariff structures in the future.

The disadvantages of meters are that your bills may rise.

The Campaign for Water Justice said the poorest and most lowly-paid households could end up facing higher bills.

"To meter everybody regardless of their circumstances or how many children they have is absolutely a recipe for disaster," said Neil Fishpool, from the campaign group.

Will I pay more or less if I have a water meter installed?

There is no easy answer, as it depends entirely on how much water is used in your home.

The rule of thumb is that large families living in properties with a low rateable value may not save with a meter.

Equally, families that take a lot of baths, do a lot of laundry and wash the car frequently may also be worse off.

COST OF EVERYDAY WATER USE

- Showers use up to 40 litres: 9p
- Baths use 80 litres: 18p
- Watering the garden uses 540 litres an hour: £1.19
- Flushing the toilet uses up to 9.5 litres: 2p
- Dishwasher uses 24 litres: 4p *Source: Ofwat 2008*

In contrast, people who are out at work most days and perhaps shower at the gym, may see their water bill come down with a meter.

The Consumer Council of Water (CCW) advises people to use its water calculator on their website to see whether a meter could save them money.

A CWW spokeswoman said many people who switched to a meter did save money but this was often because they were already aware it would do so.

There is concern among consumer groups that there is no system in place to support families who might see their bills go up if a meter is installed.

How do I go about getting a meter installed?

Water companies are obliged to fit a meter, if you request one. This is free, although if you want it in a different site to the one they suggest, you may be liable to pay the difference.

The company is also obliged to allow you to switch back to a flat-rate charge if you are not happy with the fitted meter after one year.

In a block of flats, individual households can have their own meters as long as the water supply can be separated.

Where this is not possible, water companies apply an "assessed charge" linked to likely water use. Depending on your water company, this could be estimated in a number of ways, for example the number of bedrooms or size of household.

How can I reduce my water use?

There are ways to reduce water consumption without too much effort, some obvious, like fixing a dripping tap, others less so, such as fitting aerator nozzles to taps which reduce flow. Here are some other tips:

- Wash vegetables in a bowl rather than under a running tap and keep a jug of water in the fridge so you do not have to run the tap until it goes cold
- If your toilet is older than 2001 try fitting a "hippo" or other displacement device - often available free from your water company
- If you buy a new toilet consider a dual flush model, these use about four litres on the lower flush and six on the full flush. Some use even less than this
- A shower can use less water than a bath but only up to a point. Ideally you should use a normal shower rather than a power shower and only shower for five minutes
- Always run the washing machine or a dishwasher with a full load. After washing up by hand, throw the dirty water on the garden
- If you are buying new appliances, try to go for those with the best water efficiency rating. White goods are marked on a sliding scale with "A" being the most efficient and "G" being the least
- Instead of using a sprinkler, leave your lawn to grow a little longer in summer as that helps it conserve its own moisture
- Water the garden in the evening to minimise evaporation and install a water butt to gather rainwater
- Wash your car using a bucket and sponge rather than a hose as this will save a lot of water

Shouldn't the water companies be doing more to use water more efficiently?

A Water UK spokeswoman said it was one of the water companies' highest priorities to promote efficient use of water.

They do this by investing in major programmes to reduce leakage, high investment in mains replacement and repair, and strong promotion of water efficiency to customers, she said.

The Environment Agency is calling for a complete review of the way the water industry is regulated.

This could lead to better sharing of water across company boundaries and rewards for those companies that reduce the amount of water provided.

What is being done about burst pipes and all the water lost by leaks?

Water UK said the industry was working hard to reduce leakage and the amount lost has fallen by a third in the past decade.

The Environment Agency said water companies have made excellent progress but forecast reductions in leakage were disappointing.

The agency is working with regulator Ofwat and others to identify alternatives to the current leakage targets that would better reflect the costs to society and the environment.

CCW says to repair every leak would come at a cost, which would ultimately be borne by consumers.

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