

The families who are faced with a £100 gas bill - even though they only use electricity

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Households hit by shock bills of £100 a year for gas meters they don't use also face paying up to £400 to have them removed. Stunned homeowners who don't use any gas are being sent bills that charge them a fixed daily fee for having a certain type of meter. The idea is this covers the supplier's cost of metering and billing, and that every unit of energy actually used is charged separately. But it is affecting homes that run their heating and cooking on electricity just because they have a meter on the premises — even though it's disconnected. Where previously they didn't have a gas bill, suddenly they are being forced to pay up to £100 a year for something they don't use.

To add to the insult, those who try to avoid the charge by having these so-called ghost meters taken out are being told by some suppliers such as Scottish Power that it will cost up to £400. E.on charges £82 to remove gas meters. However, some companies, such as British Gas, Npower, and SSE, will remove the meter for free. Mervyn Kohler, spokesman for charity Age UK, says: 'These charges are perverse and the whole procedure is chaotic. In some cases it may be cheaper to switch supplier to have the meter you don't use removed for free.'

Rules introduced by regulator Ofgem from the end of 2013 forced suppliers to charge a fixed daily standing charge to cover admin costs such as sending out meter readers and issuing bills. Then customers pay a flat rate for each unit of gas or electricity they use. Ofgem claims this makes bills simpler and easier to understand.

The big six's basic costs are:

- British Gas's fixed standing charge is 26p a day for gas and electricity — a total of £94.90 a year for each fuel.
- E.on, Scottish & Southern Energy and Scottish Power charge £100 a year per fuel.
- Npower bills £100 a year for gas and £40 for electricity.
- EDF customers must pay £65.70 for electricity and £91.25 for gas.

Previously customers paid one rate for the first few units of gas and electricity they use — then a cheaper rate for everything else. None of the big six has a zero standard charge to help low energy users or those who leave their properties empty for months at a time, even though Ofgem has said they are allowed to do so.

Many homes have both gas and electricity meters, even if they no longer use gas. This could be because the property once had a gas cooker or boiler but doesn't any more. Technically, the gas is still connected while the meter is still on the property, even though none is ever supplied. A spokesman for Scottish Power, which is owned by Spanish firm Iberdrola, claims they don't profit from the £400 fee they charge to remove meters. He says they pass you on to the meter operator in your region — a separate company which is nothing to do with them — and this company bills for the work carried out.

Firms who don't charge for meter removal typically have their own business which carries out meter maintenance, or absorb the fee from the regional operator. He says: 'The meter operator is required to remove the meter and securely cap the supply. This may involve capping the supply in the street rather than the premises, to ensure safety. This could involve excavation work. The meter operator will also pass the required information through industry systems to show the meter as de-energised. It is possible residential properties may not be charged. We look at this on a case by case basis.'

E.on explained its £82 fee to remove a gas meter by saying that it comes from the gas network provider which owns the meter and that it only takes payment on their behalf. It will remove electricity meters for free. EDF says it will take away gas meters for free but charges for the removal of electricity meters. A spokesperson for the Association of Meter Operators says: 'Removing a meter from someone's house and capping supply there should only take about half an hour and cost no more than £50. The operative will then return at some point in the next couple of years and decide whether they need to dig up the road and cut the supply at street level — this costs more, but if you are no longer a customer it's unlikely they could come after you for the cost.'

There are as many as 50 meter operators in the UK. Some are part of the big six's own businesses while others are third parties. Some firms tell customers that they must pay the operator's fee or even contact the operator directly.

Vulnerable customers on the Priority Services Register — including pensioners and those in ill health — may also apply to have gas meters removed free.

Before deciding to have a meter removed to save money, households could consider switching to a smaller supplier such as Ebico and Utilita, who have set their standing charges at zero. A spokesperson for Ofgem says: 'We don't set standing charges and there is nothing to stop suppliers setting the charge at zero if they want. Some suppliers are doing this. If there is consumer demand for such tariffs we would expect this to continue.'