Communal Heating Frequently Asked Questions

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A: General information on communal heating

A1: What is communal heating?
A communal heating system supplies heat to a number of dwellings from a common heat source or boiler. It may comprise of, for example, a system heating a block of flats or a larger scale system heating many buildings. This removes the requirement for individual boilers and a gas supply in each home.

A2: What are the benefits of communal heating?
1. **It's cheaper for you**
   The average resident on a communal heating system pays £560 each year. If they used an individual boiler they would pay £855 for the same amount of heating and hot water.

2. **We bulk buy gas to cut costs for you**
   Since the council can buy gas in bulk we pay only 62% of the cost per unit that individual homes do.

3. **It protects vulnerable people**
   Citizens Advice say that 1.4 million homes cut off their own energy use each year as they can’t afford the bills. Many more use less than they should to keep their homes warm enough. With communal heating everyone has at least 18 hours of heat a day during the heating season.

4. **You are protected against big price increases**
   Just a few years ago the big energy companies increased gas prices by about 30% in one go. Since 2011 gas prices have risen by 38% for individual customers but heating costs have actually reduced for communal heating residents by 5%. Communal heating protects against price shocks. This is because we can buy gas more cheaply in bulk.

5. **Your homes are dry**
   Damp homes harm health and many homes suffer from dampness and condensation when people can't afford to heat their homes enough. Dampness is very rare in communally heated homes.

A3: What was the recent consultation on communal heating all about?
The council consulted residents in April 2015 on extending the heating season into June and earlier in September when the outside temperature drops below a certain level. This was in response to feedback from some residents that they sometimes felt that the temperature in their homes was too low in June and September. Not all of the council's communal boiler houses are able to be programmed in this way so the consultation was only sent to residents where the boiler houses have this option.
B: Charges for communal heating

**B1: Why are my heating charges part of my service charge?**
Heating charges are part of your services charges because residents have told us that they like their charges to be as simple as possible – so we charge for all of the different services charges, including heating, in one go rather than as separate accounts. This is also much more cost effective for tenants and leaseholders than it would be if the council had to bill everyone separately for their heating costs.

**B2: What are my options if I am struggling to pay for my housing costs including my heating?**
Please follow the links below for information on paying your service charges and options available to you if you are in arrears.

- Leaseholders Service Charges
- Leaseholder Service Charge Arrears
- Tenant Rent and Service Charges
- Tenant Rent and Service Charge Arrears

For energy advice you can also call the Energy Advice Team on 0800 953 1221, 0207 527 2121 or energy.advice@islington.gov.uk.

**B3: Why do I pay throughout the year if my heating is turned off for part of the year?**
Following the previous consultation on communal heating in 2010, residents were offered the option of either paying heating charges during the heating season only, or paying heating charges across 12 months of the year, in order to spread the cost more evenly. A majority of residents opted to pay heating charges over 12 months to spread out the costs over the year.

**B4: Does my energy usage impact my costs?**
Residents can use the radiator valves (and a programmer or room thermostat where fitted) in their home to control the heating, for example by turning this down if the temperature is too high or when nobody is at home.

Although tenants and leaseholders are charged for their heating differently, all charges are ultimately affected by how much heat is used on the communally heated estates. Therefore, if more residents reduce consumption in this way, it will help to cut heating charges for everyone.

**B5: How are my communal heating charges calculated?**
Tenants’ charges are calculated by estimating the total cost of heating for all our communally heated estates and dividing this evenly between all tenants. This is called a ‘pooled’ system because all of the costs are shared out. The costs are also adjusted for the property size so tenants in larger properties pay more.
Leaseholders’ heating charges are calculated by taking the yearly fuel costs of the boiler house that services each leasehold property and dividing this by the number of properties that receive heating from that boiler.

**B6: Why do tenants and leaseholders pay different amounts for communal heating?**
Tenants and leaseholders both pay for the cost of gas needed to provide communal heating. The council has a different approach to calculate charges to tenants and leaseholders for communal heating. This is because there is a different legal framework for these two groups. Other service charges, such as caretaking, are also calculated differently. Please see B5 for further information on the calculation of communal heating charges.

This difference in approach means that there is almost always a difference between tenant and leaseholder charges for heating. On some estates tenants pay more than leaseholders, on other estates leaseholders pay more than tenants.

**B7: Why can't tenants and leaseholders pay for the amount of heat they use within their home?**
Giving the option of residents paying for the amount of heating they individually use would require the installation of heat meters.

Installation of heat meters is not a simple process like the installation of an electricity smart meter. In many cases it would require the significant modification of heating pipework. The council does not have sufficient resources to install individual heat meters in all communally-heated properties. Also, installing heat meters could increase the risk of residents under-heating their homes, leading to health ill effects and damp and condensation issues. Also, elderly residents and those at home with small children may well end up paying more for heating following the installation of meters.

**B8: If communal heating is cheaper, why do I pay more than other people I know who have an individual boiler?**
Communal heating is cheaper than individual boilers when the amount of heating provided is also compared. Communal heating is provided for a minimum of eighteen hours per day, from late September to May, because this is how much heating residents have told us they want to receive. In comparison the average household only uses approximately nine hours of heating per day, across a shorter heating season. The average resident on a communal heating system pays £560 each year. If they used an individual boiler they would pay £855 for the same amount of heating and hot water.

**B9: How does the Council make sure it doesn’t over-charge or under-charge tenants?**
Every year the council sets heating charges for council tenants based on a best estimate of the cost of gas for the coming year. At the end of the year the council checks to see how this compared to the actual cost. If the actual cost of heating is less than estimated, tenants are provided with a refund on a pooled basis. In 2015 - 2016 tenants received a refund of approximately £140. In the case of leaseholders, the adjustment is made when
the actual service charge statements are sent out, and the service charge account is credited if the actual costs were less than expected.
C: Controlling your communal heating

C1: How can I control the level of heat received from my communal heating system?
- Check the settings on your radiator valves. Ensure these are set to a comfortable temperature and adjust the setting if needed. If they do not work contact the council’s housing repair team Housing Direct on 0800 6943344 or 020 7527 5400 which is cheaper from a mobile
- If your property has a room thermostat, again check that this is set to a comfortable level and adjust the setting if needed.
- If you property has a programmer, you can use this to alter the heating ‘on’ times, or to turn the heating off altogether for a period of time. Where hot water is provided by the system, the hot water times can also be adjusted using the programmer. For most households, in order to provide sufficient hot water, this will not need to be on for the full 24 hours.
- Ensure appliances are switched off, rather than left on standby, to avoid heat gains from these.

C2: What are the communal heating periods for my property?
We sent out letters to all residents receiving communal heating in February 2015. These letters informed residents what type of heating system they have.

You can follow this link which shows all council blocks/estates and what type of heating system they have. www.islington.gov.uk/communalheating.

The heating period on each estate will depend on the type of heating system on that estate. There are 3 main types:
- 2-pipe systems- cannot be turned off without losing hot water to the properties, so remain switched on overnight and during the summer.
- 3 and 4 pipe systems- provide heating and hot water through separate pipework, meaning these can be controlled separately.
- Heating only systems- only provide heating to the property and switch off overnight and during the summer. Most of these systems automatically vary the radiator flow temperature depending on the external temperature.

C3: How do I keep warm if I need heating when my communal heating system is turned off?
The Energy Advice Team can provide further information on this. You can contact them by telephone on 0800 953 1221, 020 7527 2410 or e-mail energy.advice@islington.gov.uk
C4: Why do other blocks have different heating controls and will mine be upgraded?

There are different systems across Islington’s housing which will vary heating controls available, but these can be broken down into 3 main types:

a) 2-pipe systems - These provide heating and hot water through the same pipework. They cannot be turned off without losing hot water to the properties, so remain switched on overnight and during the summer.

b) 3 and 4 pipe systems (including heating systems with centralised hot water) - These provide heating and hot water through separate pipework, meaning these can be controlled separately. With these systems, the heating switches off overnight and during the summer. Most can automatically vary the radiator flow temperature depending on the external temperature and they provide a far better level of both control and internal comfort.

c) Heating only systems - These systems only provide heating to the property. (Hot water is usually supplied via a separate water heater or cylinder with immersion heaters within each dwelling.) Again, the heating provided via these systems switches off overnight and during the summer, and most of these can automatically vary the radiator flow temperature depending on the external temperature.

Islington Council has an ongoing programme of upgrades to its communal heating systems and controls. This generally includes separating the heating and hot water functions of the system, and installing standard domestic heating controls (e.g. room thermostats, programmers and thermostatic radiator valves).

In the long term, this will offer residents much better control of the heating in their homes.

D: Problems with your communal heating

D1: Who do I contact if I have a problem with my communal heating?

If there is a fault and/or the heating system is not working, you should contact the council’s housing repair team Housing Direct on 0800 6943344 or 020 7527 5400 which is cheaper from a mobile.

Text 07786 202 892
Email repairs@islington.gov.uk
Opening hours
8am - 8pm, Monday to Friday
8am - 12pm Saturdays

Many communal heating systems automatically vary the radiator flow temperature based on external temperature meaning radiators will be cooler during milder weather (and may not give any noticeable heat when it is warm outside). In the past, there have been resident call-outs due to cool radiators when it has been warm outside and the heating was working correctly.