Communal heating systems – how they work

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Communal heating system
Heat and/or hot water is provided to your home via a system of pipes connected to a central boiler or group of boilers, and in some instances central hot water storage cylinders. The boiler operating times are set by the council's communal heating policy (see below). Tenants and leaseholders who are connected to the system pay for their heating along with their rent or service charges.

Council's communal heating policy
Following consultation in 2010 the policy is for heating to be provided for 18 hours per day between 6am and 12 midnight from September through to May.

Systems which provide heating only (Type 1)
Boilers will be on 18 hours per day and will be 'optimised' to get up to temperature during any sudden cold weather by 6am.

Systems which provide heating and hot water (with night set back) (Types 2 and 3)
There are two types of these boilers: one will provide normal heating levels for 18 hours per day but will be turned off at midnight (Type 2) and the other will provide normal heating levels for 18 hours per day but will be turned down to a lower temperature setting overnight (Type 3). They both operate under an 'optimum start' system which means depending on the outside temperature, the boilers will override the reduced temperature up to three hours before 6am to ensure that the system is up to temperature by 6am.

In the summer these boilers continue to provide hot water. Make sure that you adjust the summer/winter valve. This is usually located in the cylinder cupboard and should be clearly labelled. You can also turn off the thermostatic radiator valves (TRVs) on each radiator.

Systems which provide heating and hot water (without night set back) (Type 4)
As above, these communal boilers will be kept running for 24 hours to ensure that hot water is available. The council are aiming to upgrade pipework and where necessary boilers, when funding is available.

In the summer the boilers continue to provide hot water. Make sure that you adjust the summer/winter valve. This is usually located in the cylinder cupboard and should be clearly labelled. You can turn off the thermostatic radiator valves (TRVs) on each radiator.

Heating and hot water via Switch 2 (Type 5)

This system runs from a central boiler house but unlike other communal heating systems you have more control over the level of heating and hot water in your homes. You will be issued with a heating card when you sign your tenancy agreement. You need to buy heating credits from the agreed sales points and insert your card into your heat controller. You will use up the credit depending on how much heating or hot water you use.

Figure 1 - Switch 2

Thermostatic radiator valves (TRV)

Whatever type of system you have, most radiators in your flat will have a TRV. You can adjust the setting on the radiator so that the room temperature goes up or down. The higher the number on the TRV the warmer the radiator will get.

Figure 2 - TRV

The communal boiler will generally go off at midnight. In very cold weather remember to turn up the TRV before you go to bed to maximise heat released into your rooms. This way the radiator will heat up quickly in the morning when the boiler switches on again.

Remember if you have long curtains or furniture against the radiator, the air around the TRV may get hot and switch off the radiator. When you move the curtains and furniture away from the TRV this will allow the TRV to open and make the radiator hot again.

Room thermostat

You can use the room thermostat to regulate the heating in your flat while the boiler is on. If you are too hot, rather than opening the window, turn down the thermostat. A setting of between 18 degrees and 21 degrees is generally a comfortable temperature. Adjust this up or downwards so that you are comfortable.

Figure 3 – Room thermostat

The communal boiler will generally go off at midnight. In very cold weather you can turn up the thermostat at around 10pm to ensure that you get the maximum amount of heat before the boiler switches off. This will also ensure that your home heats up quickly in the morning when the boiler switches on again. If you get too hot turn down the thermostat or adjust individual TRVs if you have them.

Hot water - tap thermostat

This is strapped to the cylinder in the hot water storage cupboard and controls the hot water temperature. This is usually set at “4” and will not normally need to be adjusted.

Figure 4 – Hot water thermostat

Stored hot water

Some communal systems do not have hot water storage cylinders in individual flats. Hot water is supplied direct to your taps.