

Utility charges

Services to your home such as electricity, gas, oil, water and sewerage are called 'utility' services. This leaflet explains your responsibilities for connecting and disconnecting these services. It also explains which costs are your responsibility, and which costs are your landlord's responsibility.

➡ If you have a problem with a utility service, you should contact the service provider. If they don't fix the problem you can contact the Energy and Water Ombudsman of Victoria (EWOV) on ☎ 1800 500 509.

Initial connection fees

Initial connection fees are charged when a service is connected to a property for the very first time. Tenants are not responsible for the initial connection fees for electricity, water, gas or oil services. These are the responsibility of your landlord. If your landlord tries to pass on these charges to you, you should not pay them. (This does not apply to telephone lines. See 'Telephone' on the back of this fact sheet.)

If you have already paid the initial connection fees, the landlord must repay the money to you. Write a letter to the landlord asking for a refund within 28 days. Attach a copy of both the bill and the receipt and keep a copy. If the landlord doesn't refund the money, you should apply to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal asking that the landlord be ordered to repay you.

Separate meters

It is important to know if you have a separate meter for utilities. A separate meter is one that measures the utility supply to your home only. For example, some blocks of flats have separate water meters for each flat, while others have just one meter to measure the amount of water used by the entire block of flats. You can find out if you have a separate meter by contacting the distribution company directly.

The property is separately metered

If your property is separately metered, you are responsible for paying the following charges:

- > all charges for the supply or use of electricity, gas or oil (including supply charges and reconnection fees)
- > a charge for an upgrade to the electricity or gas meter
- > all charges based on the amount of water consumed (but not service charges or reconnection fees)
- > all sewerage disposal charges
- > all charges for the use of bottled gas (but not for the supply or hire of gas bottles)

You can negotiate an agreement with your landlord that they pay any of these charges. For example, if the property has a large garden that the landlord wants you to maintain, you could negotiate that they pay for the water consumption charges in return for you regularly watering the garden. Make sure that you get the agreement in writing, signed by you and your landlord.

If your landlord pays a bill that you are responsible for, you are required to pay them back. Your landlord is not allowed to charge you more than the utility provider would have charged.

The property is not separately metered

If you do not have separate meters for your electricity, gas, oil or water service, you are not responsible for any of the costs of that service or supply. These costs will be the responsibility of the landlord. If your property uses bottled gas you are liable for the cost of the gas, but not for the supply or hire of the bottles.

If you are a public or community housing tenant and it is not practical to install separate meters (eg in high rise flats) the Office of Housing can charge you a 'service fee' for your gas, electricity, water, heating or laundry facilities.

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Reimbursement

If you have paid utility charges when they are the landlord's responsibility, the landlord must reimburse you. Write to the landlord enclosing a copy of the bill and the receipt, giving them 28 days to repay you.

If the landlord does not pay you back within 28 days you can apply to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal for an order that the landlord repay you.

If the charges are the landlord's responsibility and they refuse to pay, the utility providers may threaten to cut off your supply. If this is the case, you should apply urgently to the Tribunal asking that the landlord be ordered to pay the bills. The Tenants Union can help you apply to the Tribunal. You will also need to tell the utility provider that there is a dispute and negotiate with them about not cutting off your supply. If the utility provider does not agree to this, you should contact EWOV.

When you move in

When you move into a rental property, it is your responsibility to have the utility services reconnected in your name. You should give the utility providers 48 hours' notice and they will arrange for the service to be connected and for the meter to be read. Notify the water supplier in your area when you are moving in so you will not be charged for the previous tenant's water usage.

If you want to install energy efficient fittings or appliances eg a shower head that reduces water flow, you can try to negotiate with your landlord that they cover or share the cost. You should also find out whether or not the landlord wants you to remove it when you move out, as under the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* tenants are normally required to remove any fixtures they have added and restore the property to its original condition.

➡ If you are a Health Care Card Holder and you are having trouble paying a utility bill or you need an essential appliance such as a fridge or washing machine, you may be eligible for a Utility Relief Grant or Appliance and Infrastructure Grant. For more information phone the Department of Human Services Concessions Unit on ☎ 1800 658 521.

When you move out

There are no disconnection fees when you move out. However, you must tell the utility

providers when you are moving so they can arrange for a final meter reading and disconnection of utilities, including the telephone. You should give 48 hours' notice. If you don't disconnect the utilities, you could end up having to pay the next tenant's bill.

Repairs

If a water fixture or fitting (pipes, taps, hot water service etc) supplied by the landlord needs to be replaced, it must be replaced with a product that has an 'A' rating. An A rating is given by Standards Australia to water-efficient fixtures and fittings. If the landlord doesn't replace the fixture or fitting with an A-rated appliance, you are not responsible for the water charges. These become the landlord's responsibility until they change the fixture or fitting to one that does have an A rating. If this happens to you, you should inform the landlord that they are responsible for all water charges until the appliance is replaced. If the landlord refuses to pay, you can apply to the Tribunal asking that the landlord be ordered to pay.

See the **Repairs** fact sheet for more information about what to do if you have a repair problem with an appliance or fitting provided by your landlord.

Telephone

Tenants are responsible for all charges related to the supply and use of a telephone at the rented premises. This includes all service fees, call charges, equipment rental charges and connection fees. It also includes the cost of the initial connection of a telephone line.

If you are moving into a property that has been newly built, or where there has not been a connection for some time, it may be necessary for the line to be laid or re-installed. This can be extremely expensive and you cannot recover the cost from the landlord. We advise that you check with the telephone service provider to see if a line will need to be installed to the property **before you sign the lease**. If it does, you should negotiate with the landlord to pay the cost of the initial connection. Make sure you get any agreement in writing, signed by you and your landlord.

For more information phone the Tenants Union Advice Line on ☎ (03) 9416 2577.