

Replacing older central heating controls could cut your fuel bills by up to 17 per cent, according to a recently published good practice guide by independent consumer research charity Ricability.

Taking Control, which is jointly supported by Help the Aged, the Housing Corporation and Ofgem, provides older people with the latest information on buying or upgrading central- heating controls.

Following user trials, Ricability's comprehensive guide rates – according to ease of use by people with impaired vision or dexterity – the main types of heating controls currently available, and directs people to where they can find help with grants and keeping their bills down.

Although tests showed that the majority of central-heating controls cause difficulty for people with a visual or dexterity impairment, until now there has been very little guidance available on the best controls for older and disabled people

The launch of this publication is highly topical following last month's fuel poverty implementation plan, which aspires to end fuel poverty in England among vulnerable groups by 2010, and the British Gas Help the Aged Partnership Excess Winter Deaths campaign in November 2004. This campaign, which highlighted that the deaths of between 20,000 and 50,000 older people each winter could be avoided, called for central heating to be made available to all older people.

To get hold of a copy of *Taking Control – a guide to buying or upgrading central heating controls*, please send an A4 SAE (for 58p) to Ricability, 30 Angel Gate, City Road, London EC1V 2PT. Alternatively, you can download the guide at www.ricability.org.uk

Mervyn Kohler

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Proposals introduced to stop gas and electricity disconnections

Energy companies have proposed a new strategy to prevent vulnerable people from being disconnected in response to the tragic death of a pensioner couple last winter. Ofgem, the government body that regulates the energy market, challenged the companies to prepare a strategy and is now consulting on the proposals.

The proposals came after a couple died from the cold after being disconnected by British Gas during the summer. It seemed the couple had lost the ability to cope as they had enough money to pay their debt, but had not responded to numerous letters and calls. However, British Gas said it had not contacted social services because of fears over data protection.

The new plan, which was produced by the Energy Retailers Association, sets out for the first time when energy companies can and should contact social services about customers with debts. The companies will pass on customers' details only where the bill payer has been identified as vulnerable and all attempts to resolve the debt have failed.

For the purposes of the strategy, all people of pensioner age could potentially be classified as 'vulnerable' along with other groups, such as those with an illness or disability. This would extend protection for pensioners as current rules only prevent older people being disconnected during the winter months.

The energy companies will also continue to install electricity pre-payment meters rather than disconnect people. This stops households getting further into debt but can lead to households 'self disconnecting' by not topping-up their meter.

Richard Wilson

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