

40 ways to give your home an autumn MOT

Forget spring cleaning: this weekend get your house in order to save money and give you peace of mind. By *Martina Lees, Sarah Lonsdale, Jayne Dowe*



If ever there was a time to MoT your home, it is this bank holiday weekend. Terrifying forecasts of 18 per cent inflation and £5,000 annual energy bills next year have sent a chill through Britain's homes even as we sweltered through a hot, record-breaking summer. We all know that winter is coming.

Orders for insulation jumped 1,200 per cent last week at the online marketplace OnBuy.com. But keeping costs down is not just about improving your energy efficiency. Build costs soared

26 per cent in the past year and are still rising fast, government data shows — so letting a leak or a cracked roof-tile mushroom into a full-blown disaster will cost you much more than before. And if you have been planning a home improvement project, pin those costs down now.

From checking for hidden issues to boosting your insulation, here are 40 ways to protect your home from the cost of living crisis.

Use efficient appliances

1 Assess appliances

Is there a quick fix to save money on all those electrical appliances humming, whirring and guzzling your increasingly precious electricity? The short answer is yes. The consumer group Which? estimated that based on April's energy price, people using the least efficient domestic appliances were spending £550 a year more than those using the most energy-efficient ones.

The long answer is more complicated. A first rule is not to rush out and buy a new model until your old one is at the end of its lifespan. If you haven't bought an appliance in the past year, you may be flummoxed by the new A to G rating system that came in last March. This means that reasonably efficient appliances are now (confusingly) rated D, whereas these are in fact among the most cost-effective currently available. Very few models yet make the B or even A grade — and those that do tend to be very expensive. Prioritise the appliances you use the most.

2 Choose the right fridge

Because it is always on, it's important to get this right. A fridge energy rating, for example, is partly based on its size, with smaller models getting a better rating. But a tiny fridge is never going to suffice for a family of six. The Energy Saving Trust (EST) estimates that choosing a D-rated model over an F-rated one could save you nearly £600 in energy bills over an



average 17-year lifetime. Which? found an A-rated model such as the LG GBB92MCBAP (annual energy use: £40) may save you £140 a year compared with the least efficient model — but it will cost you £1,799 to buy.

3 Defrost the freezer

To keep it from gobbling energy, defrost your freezer when ice has built up to a quarter of an inch. Speed up the melting process with pans of hot water and use a plastic spatula to scrape off sheets of ice. Some new models have a holiday mode — “ideal when you’re on your travels and there’s no food in your fridge. It’ll keep the freezer going, but turn the fridge off,” says Sophie Beckett-Smith, large-appliances expert at online retailer AO.com.

4 Descale the kettle

Kettles are one of your most intensive energy guzzlers. In the 60 per cent of Britain with hard water, limescale builds up to insulate the element, causing the kettle to use even more energy. To descale, unplug and fill the kettle with a mixture of half white vinegar and half water. Let it soak for an hour or so, then boil to the satisfying sound of limescale fizzing to nothing. Cool, rinse well, boil fresh water and you’re ready to go. Or try Kilrock Big K Multi-Purpose Descaler (£4 for 400ml).

5 Boil less . . .



The average household boils a kettle four times a day but often uses more water than is required. Only boiling what you need could save you as much as £50 a year. If you’re looking for a new kettle, check the minimum fill. This ranges widely, from one cup or 0.275 litres for the new Philips Eco Conscious jug kettle (£49.99) to 0.7 litres for the Tefal Avanti. Over a year that represents a lot of unnecessary water boiling.

6 . . . or don’t boil

Another feature on some kettles, such as the Aigostar glass kettle (£31.99), is a thermometer that tells you how hot the water is — often you don’t need to bring it to 100C. Green tea, for example, can be brewed perfectly well at 80C, while mint tea is best steeped at 70C.

7 Ditch the tumble dryer



Using your tumble dryer three times a week could cost you more than £200 a year. Drying washing on a line is free; if drying indoors, ensure the room is well ventilated to avoid damp. Choose a rapid spin-cycle (1400 or 1600 rpm) on the washing machine to remove as much water as possible. Hang washing up high, using a ceiling-mounted contraption such as the Clothesmaid (from £60.99, clothesmaid.com). Don’t hang laundry on radiators — it can cause condensation and even stain your walls.

8 Try the launderette

For large items like towels or duvet covers, consider using your local launderette’s tumble dryers instead: they may sound like a blast from the past but new ones with a modern community feel — some even do great coffee

while you wait — charge very little for their services. Kitty's Launderette in Liverpool for example (kittyslaundrette.org.uk) costs £3.50 for an extra-large DIY drying cycle. Laundry and Latte (laundryandlatte.co.uk) in Brentwood, Essex, charges £3 for an extra-large tumble dry using its super-efficient gas-powered machines.

9 Optimise the oven

After kettles and tumble dryers, ovens rank third on the list of energy-guzzling appliances. Self-cleaning ones are the best insulated and therefore the most efficient. (Don't use the self-cleaning function as it uses a lot of energy. Clean it manually — the Cookery School uses Delphis Eco products.) The fan function is more efficient as it cooks at lower temperatures, the Energy Saving Trust says. When you use your oven, try to fill it to capacity: batch cook and freeze the extra portions.

10 Opt for induction

It's time to learn to love the induction hob. They are far more efficient than gas hobs, converting about 90 per cent of the energy they use into cooking use, compared with 60 per cent of heat from a gas hob, much of which escapes into the kitchen. The answer is to combine an induction hob with top-quality cookware such as Le Creuset or All-Clad. They're not cheap: the All-Clad 8-inch induction hob



Choose a washing machine with short, low temperature cycles to save energy and water
BEKO

frying pan costs £149, but it's worth putting on the Christmas list.

11. Turn off the microwave

"If you use a microwave, switch it off when it's not in use," says Jean Hayes, community engagement lead at the price comparison service Uswitch. "With its digital display and lightbulb it's one of the worst offenders in guzzling energy on standby mode."

12. Change lightbulbs

"If you haven't switched to LED already, now is the time," Hayes says. "One LED bulb, used for ten hours a day, will cost you £10.22 for the year. One halogen bulb will cost you £42.92 and one incandescent bulb £61.32. If you multiply that by ten bulbs for a house, you're looking at nearly £500 a year difference." It is, as they

say, a no-brainer.

13. Turn down TV brightness

Size, brightness and whether you bother to turn off standby all affect the cost of the household's favourite appliance. According to the EST, an F-rated 32in television costs £17 a year to run, compared with £81 for a G-rated 60in.

While leaving a television on standby doesn't use much energy, digital boxes can cost as much as £40 a year on standby. Turn them off at the mains when not in use (although you won't be able to record programmes).

Save water (and energy)

14. Disinfect the washing machine

"Washing at low temperatures takes less time, saves you money and is better for your



clothes — it's a win-win situation," says Lynsey Crombie, aka the Queen of Clean (Insta: [@lynsey_queenofclean](#)). "Add an anti-bacterial rinse aid (such as the one by Dettol) or just chuck in a capful of white vinegar to kill bacteria that survive at low temperatures. Do a hot wash (90C) once a month to kill off bugs and smells."

At least four times a year, descale with a product such as Quickshine washing machine descaler (£6.99 for three, Lakeland) to prevent corrosion of the heating element. Clear the machine's filter from rogue coins, lint and detergent residue.

"And don't forget to turn it off at the mains when you're not using it," Crombie adds. "That goes for all your appliances — they silently suck your energy like vampires."

15. Wash in short cycles

Choose a machine with short, low temperature cycles. The Beko Pro AquaTech B5W5 (£399) washes 9kg in 28 minutes. If you're one of the thousands of homes now with solar thermal panels then consider switching to the UK's only hot fill washing machine, the Ebac (£599, [ebac.com](#)), developed in 2016, which claims to save £85 a year over the average washing machine.

16. Use the dishwasher

The good news is that the most efficient dishwashers on a full load save water over



Preventing draughts throughout your home will trap heat inside and save energy
PENNY WATSON

hand-washing. Choose the quick wash facility for every wash. This can make a difference of two or even three hours of usage time per cycle with savings of up to £50 a year. The Bosch Serie 6 SMS6ZDW48G (£729) has a quick wash time of 35 minutes but the HISENSE HS661C60WUR (£479) beats the field at 15 minutes.

Once a month, clean the dishwasher. Put a bowl of white vinegar in the upper rack and run a hot cycle; then sprinkle bicarbonate of soda over the bottom of the appliance. Run a short, hot cycle to leave it fresh. "Clean out the filter too — a clean machine always costs less to run," Crombie says.

17. Switch shower heads

Showers and baths account for a third of the average household's water use — and

most of that is heated first before it pours down the drain. Fit a low-flow shower head: at a flow rate of 7 litres per minute — about half the average shower — the cheapest Hansgrohe EcoSmart shower head (£16.07) will save you 11,000 litres of water a year and pay for itself within four months, according to the Save Money Cut Carbon website. Under its "give eco a go" pledge, you can try out any product and — if you don't like it — return it within 30 days for your money back ([savemoneycutcarbon.com](#)).

Reduce heat loss

18. Banish draughts

Draught-proofing around windows and doors could save you about £45 a year, according to the EST. Chimney Sheep uses moth-proof Herdwick wool from the Lake District for its new self-



adhesive draught seal tape for doors and windows (£7.50 for 5m), as well as inside its door draught excluder (from £25). Its wool gap filler is a natural alternative to foam fillers for any other cracks and gaps (£10 for 2m, chimneysheep.co.uk).

For sash windows, push Gapseal into gaps when the cold arrives: it is a flexible, non-permanent sealer that won't peel off like the stick-on variety. Remove in spring and reuse every year (£14 for 10 metres, gapseal.co.uk).

At his young family's Victorian terrace in east London, the architect Ben Ridley insulated original single-glazed bay windows with magnetic Perspex sheets from Magnetglaze as an easy DIY job (kits from about £30, theplasticpeople.co.uk). He also fitted a Magflap letterbox draught excluder (£27.90, magflap.co.uk).

19. Fit thermal blinds

These can halve heat loss through windows, but you have to keep them closed. DuoShade thermal blinds have aluminium-lined honeycomb pockets in the fabric that traps warm air so it doesn't escape. Their blackout lining helps to keep your home cool in warmer months too, and are available with a click-to-fit headrail that is fitted without drilling (from £28.15, blinds-2go.co.uk).

20. Replace windows



Arrange for your home's boiler to be serviced to make sure that it's running safely and efficiently
GETTY IMAGES

Upgrading windows to thermally efficient double or triple-glazing might mean a wait of 12 to 16 weeks, says Ryan Schofield, managing director of Thames Valley Window Company. "The global shortfall of raw materials, coupled with a shortage of lorry drivers, has caused lead times for new windows and doors to change from weeks to months."

If new doors are also included along with windows – a good plan if you're undertaking a thermal upgrade anyway – for a three-bedroom semi Thames Valley Windows would charge £12,000-£15,000.

21. Fit a new front door

You can pay £700 or £7,000 for a new thermally efficient front door, which will pay its own dividends cutting down draughts and keeping your house warm. However, expect

a wait: "Current lead times are 12 to 14 weeks and on some [doors], 14 to 16 weeks," says Elizabeth Assaf, co-founder of Urban Front.

22. Top up loft insulation

A quarter of heat – worth up to £580 a year – is lost through the roof in an uninsulated home, the EST says. It estimates that a third of homes still have less than 150mm of loft insulation. Top up yours to the recommended 270mm (from £500). It will pay for itself within a year or two. You don't have to lose attic storage space: stow belongings on a raised platform atop "loft flooring legs" fitted on ceiling joists. Add an insulated loft hatch such as those by Wellhöfer (from £244; ecologicalbuildingsystems.com).



23. Insulate floors

Easily fill gaps between bare floorboards with squidgy DraughtEx rolls (from £9.49; draughtex.co.uk) or V-shaped StopGap strips (£25; stopgaps.com). Good underlay beneath carpets, laminate or vinyl flooring also helps. “Much like duvets, underlay and carpets come with a tog rating. Starting from 0 for lower insulation qualities, a higher tog rating indicates better heat-retention

properties,” says Josh Barber, Buyer at Flooring Superstore.

Don’t block traditional air bricks: that causes damp. Replace them with AirEx smart bricks, which close the floor cavity on icy days to stop the cold coming in from below — reducing your home’s heat loss by up to 16 per cent (£450 installed; airex.tech).

24. Insulate walls

If your home was built after 1920 — but not in the past 20 years — the external walls are likely to be two layers with a gap between them. Cavity-wall insulation plugs the gap, keeping heat in and saving you £280 a year in a semi. Almost a third of the 19.4 million British homes with cavity walls lack insulation, the EST says. It’s usually a one-day job to blow the insulation in from the outside (£1,200 for a semi). Find an installer at nationalinsulationassociation.org.uk.

Almost eight million homes with solid walls have no wall insulation. Adding it internally



Stock up on firewood and keep it off the ground in a sheltered, well-ventilated space

MERCURY GREY WOOD PAINT/THORNDOWN PAINTS ON HUTTON LOG STORE

(£10,000) or externally (£14,000) is expensive, but less so if you are renovating anyway.

Before you start work, it is worth getting a “whole house retrofit plan” (up to £500) that recommends the right measures for your property. The charitable Superhomes network (£50 membership, superhomes.org.uk) offers access to its network of assessors who can draw this up.

Optimise heating**25. Service the boiler**

“Get your boiler serviced,” says Steph Bron, co-founder of the DIY Doers Club (thetvcarpenter.com). Do this once a year. Find a professional in your area via the Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineers (ciphe.org.uk).

Ask them “to check that your pipework is properly insulated as well, especially pipes that run outside. These should be insulated to protect from freezing,” Bron adds.

Wrapping the hot water tank in an 8cm-thick jacket (about £17) saves £35 off your annual energy bills, according to the EST.

If your boiler is at the end of its life, and you have a well-insulated home with underfloor heating, consider switching to a heat pump — funded for up to £5,000 under the government’s boiler replacement scheme.

26. Boost radiators

“Put your heating on early to check that everything is working as normal. Don’t wait until it is already a necessity,” Bron says. Think about settings. The optimum room temperature is 18C-21C, but reducing it by 1C could cut annual heating bills by as much as £128, according to Uswitch. Stick Radflek reflector panels behind radiators to reduce heat loss through external walls (£22 for three sheets; radflek.com).

27. Upgrade heating controls

Fit thermostatic radiator valves (TRVs) to control the temperature of individual rooms — they cost less than £10 and installation is a simple DIY job. Don’t put furniture or long curtains in front of TRVs: this stops them from reading the room temperature correctly.

While smart heating controls that learn your behaviour can save money, studies suggest they take longer to pay for their upfront



cost as they can be quite expensive, the EST says.

Prevent problems

28. Prevent damp

Like toothache, the longer you leave damp, the more painful and costly it is to fix. Patrol your home for clogged air bricks and gutters. Black mould, flaking paint, peeling plaster and a musty smell can suggest that damp has taken hold.

Condensation from moisture in the air is the most common cause. Ventilate, especially in bathrooms and kitchens. To keep the bathroom cosy but ventilated, replace the extractor fan with a single-room heat recovery unit such as the Evirovent Heatsava, which retains warmth from the moist air it sucks out (about £425).

Damp-proof paint can help, but will make the problem worse in historic buildings that need to breathe. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (spab.org.uk) has a helpline for anyone who needs advice on maintaining an older building (020 7456 0916).

29. Mend gutters

Go outside in a downpour and see if water runs down the wrong place. Full replacement of 15-20m of guttering and three downpipes should cost around £900, says the trades comparison site Checktrade. Thankfully, post-pandemic delays for plastic guttering, drainage and water butts



Hampton Blue Velvet 3 Seater Chesterfield Sofa, £899.99, furniturechoice.co.uk

“haven’t been as severe as for those that utilise materials such as steel”, says Gian-Carlo Grossi, managing director of Roofing Megastore (roofingmegastore.co.uk).

30. Inspect your roof

Check inside the loft for leaks, before it starts dripping through the ceiling. From outside, look for loose mortar at junctions and cracked, slipped or missing tiles – replace these to stop leaks and prevent more tiles from being dislodged. Excessive moss can cause damp; brush it down. On flat roofs, check for standing water. If access is difficult, hire a drone pilot (certified with the Civil Aviation Authority) for inspection. The National Federation of Roofing Contractors has a register of

roofers and a helpline where you can speak to an expert (020 7638 7663, nfrc.co.uk).

31. Locate your stopcock

Knowing where the stopcock is – used to turn off the water supply to your home – can save you hundreds of pounds of water damage if a pipe bursts. Check that it is not stuck from disuse: close it (righty-tighty), test if the taps still runs, then open the stopcock again (lefty-loosey). Don’t force it if it has seized up but call a plumber.

32. Repoint brickwork

This is one of the least-exciting maintenance jobs ever, but necessary. Mortar degrades and can allow moisture ingress that leads – inevitably – to damp. It’s a costly job, even more so with



older houses, which may need pricier lime mortar.

Checkatrade says repointing a semi-detached house costs £4,500 on average, and a Victorian terraced property is £3,700.

33. Sweep the chimney

Birds' nests in chimneys can cause fires and harbour pests. Find a qualified sweep near you at the National Association of Chimney Sweeps (nacs.org.uk). Prices depend on location and chimney type, but £65 is typical. Check your home insurance includes an open fire and get a certificate from the sweep to use in the event of a claim.

34. Check for pests

Hot summers increase the likelihood of pests. The webbing clothes moth tops a National Trust list of the worst culprits feasting on our homes, followed by silverfish and Australian spider beetle. Hilary Jarvis, assistant preventive conservator at the National Trust, recommends a "really good, Downton-style clean" to check for pests. Vacuum those dark corners where bugs like to lurk undisturbed, such as under furniture and stair rods. Wash curtains, plump cushions and beat rugs. Take out all clothes from cupboards to check for larvae behind lapels and under armpits. Wash or dry clean garments before you pack them away, as moth larvae rarely eat clean silk or wool.

Prepare outside

35. Trim trees

Every drop of sunlight counts in winter, when solar gain through windows can help to keep a house warm and delay switching on central heating. Keep overhanging trees in trim. Tree surgeons charge around £150-£200 a day per labourer, with two or three in a typical crew, according to Derbyshire-based tree surgery company Bark and Branch. The Arboricultural Association has a handy "find a tree surgeon" tool, searchable by postcode (trees.org.uk).

36. Stock up on fuel

Logs for the wood-burner or fire pit should be at least one year old; ash, beech, birch and oak are best. Check it is dry with a pin moisture meter (£40), which you stick into a log to give a digital reading. Store firewood off the ground in a sheltered, well-ventilated space — garages are not recommended.

37. Don't forget the barbecue

Put it in the shed over winter, or invest in a good cover. Coversandall.co.uk makes bespoke and truly waterproof covers for barbecues, outdoor kitchens and garden furniture. Treat wooden furniture with olive oil or teak oil before you pack it away.

Plan ahead

38. Order the Christmas sofa

If you want a new sofa this Christmas, allow between seven and nine weeks for it to arrive, depending on the style you choose, says Charlie Marshall, founder of sofa company Loaf. This is quite normal. And although there have been widespread post-pandemic reports of furniture getting held up in transit, he says there are currently "no difficulties that will impact the delivery".

39. . . . and the new kitchen too

Retailers report that from designing to fitting a new kitchen is taking six to 12 weeks, not counting the time to reconfigure walls. Many builders will only hold a quote for 30 days and include a contract clause stating that the price of materials is likely to continue to rise. As reference, the average cost of an extension finished with windows, doors, utilities and so on, is £1,250-£2,500 per sq m according to Checkatrade, so an average 20 sq m build will cost £25,000 to £50,000. For now.

40. Book a builder

Before the pandemic, you had to wait four months for a quality builder to be available to start work, according to the Federation of Master Builders. Now it's easily double that as 71 per cent of the trade body's members say they have delayed jobs over hold-ups in materials, so reserve now to start a spring renovation. ■

