

# Will a wood-burning stove save money on my energy bills?

If you've not got cash to burn, use our guide on which log-burner to buy, how to install it and how to get fires going. By Jayne Dowle

It's the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, and time to start hauling in the logs and hunkering down by the fire. Despite concerns over pollution it seems everybody wants a log-burner to help achieve this year's big burning quest — reducing the rocketing amount we spend on gas and electricity.

Google searches for log-burners are up 140 per cent compared with last year, with searches for gas fire installation plummeting by 30.8 per cent, according to the trades comparison service Checkatrade. Indeed, between April and June there has been a 40 per cent increase in total sales of log-burners and stoves since the same period last year, according to the Stove Industry Alliance (SIA). Most of these sales are reportedly to homeowners upgrading to new Ecodesign models (stoves that meet strict criteria on emissions and efficiency, which came into force in January 2022), which burn more efficiently and with minimum emissions.

## How to open up space

If you have a fireplace but no log-burner as yet, you need to see if you can open up the space and have an open chimney flue. “The telltale sign that a flue has been in use might be an airbrick



Gyrofocus fireplace, from £11,200, [focus-fireplaces.com](http://focus-fireplaces.com)

in the skirting board or just above; this is to stop the flue condensating [causing damp]. If it's been blocked off you'll have to remove whatever is covering it and have a look up it,” says renovation expert Dominic Marchant, founder of a building company based in Petworth, West Sussex. “Another sign of a useable chimney flue is if you pull back the carpet and see if there is a hearth underneath that may have been stone or tiles on top and what is left is a cement/lime base.”

The chimney will need sweeping before you install a log-burner. Experts recommend that a chimney is swept every

year when in use. A single chimney sweeping should cost no more than £90, according to Checkatrade.

“The flue is likely to be covered in cobwebs and possibly full of sticks from birds,” Marchant says. “It is important to make sure that the flue is clear; at this point you would need to employ a chimney sweep. They would also advise you as to whether you need to replace the cowl to the chimney pot; a cowl is important as it helps the draught going up the chimney, reduces downdraught and helps to prevent birds and debris causing blockages.”

If your house isn't listed you



normally wouldn't need planning permission for opening up a fireplace, but you should contact a building regulations independent adviser or go via your local authority to check any work you're planning meets required standards.

### What stove to fit

You can choose from a huge variety of styles now, from traditional to contemporary, super-cool log-burners that can be suspended from the ceiling. Whatever your choice, it must be certified Ecodesign.

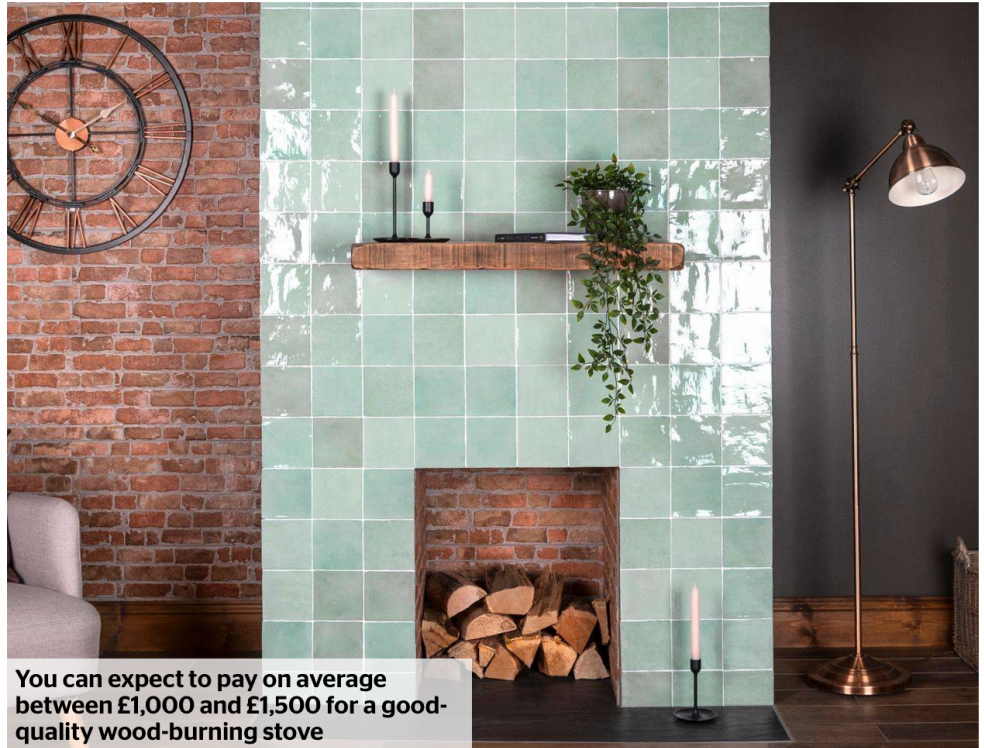
Expect to pay on average between £1,000 and £1,500 for a good-quality wood-burning or multifuel stove from a reputable brand, the SIA says. Cheaper stoves are available, often online, but they may be of poorer quality and not meet regulations.

"In addition to the purchase cost you can expect to pay the same amount again for flueing [installing a chimney liner and associated works] and installation," says SIA chairman Andy Hill. "Be aware that your location is not the only factor that will impact installation costs: the type of property and the complexity of the installation will also need to be considered."

### What the rules are

As part of its Clean Air Strategy the government is outlawing the sale of the most polluting fuels as well as ensuring only the cleanest stoves are now on sale.

Many parts of the UK, especially towns and cities, are



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designated smoke-control areas (also known as smokeless zones). Contact your local council to check the rules for your neighbourhood and find out more at [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk).

If you live in a smoke-control area you are only allowed to legally burn wood on a Defra (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) approved wood-burner or stove, which will have been rigorously tested for smoke emissions. Confusingly this is often referred to as "Defra exempt".

Appliances are exempted separately in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Before you buy, find the definitive legally approved list of appliances at [smokecontrol.defra.gov.uk/appliances](https://smokecontrol.defra.gov.uk/appliances).

"The easiest way to identify a stove model that is both

Ecodesign compliant and Defra exempt is to buy an appliance that is Clear Skies certified," Hill advises.

You might opt for a multifuel stove, which will allow the burning of wood and solid fuels such as anthracite and smokeless briquettes or ovals.

If you're in a smoke-control area you can only burn approved smokeless fuels such as Homefire, Ecoal50 or Phurnacite. The sale of loose, traditional house coal in England is planned to end by 2023; like wet wood it gives off high levels of tiny particle pollutants known as PM2.5, which can cause circulatory and heart problems.

### What fuel to use

Even if things look desperate, never be tempted to smash up the furniture to keep warm; in



England wood for wood-burners should always be correctly kiln-dried and certified as “Ready to Burn” (which means it has a reduced 20 per cent moisture content, as opposed to now-outlawed wet wood) by Hetas (Heating Equipment Testing and Approvals Scheme). This includes kindling.

If it’s ready to burn you shouldn’t have to worry about letting your firewood “season”, but always find a dry, covered place for storage.

What wood burns best? “As a general rule hardwoods are denser than softwoods so provide a longer burn,” says Sally Coulthard, author of *The Little Book of Building Fires* (Anima, £6.99). “They also have less resin than softwood so they are not as prone to clog up your chimney with tar. Best for burning are ash, oak and hornbeam. Poor burners are lime and horse chestnut.”

### Can you save money on energy bills?

This is the big question. There are so many variables in the answer: the size, style, build method and period of your house; the level of insulation you have, including doors, windows, loft, wall, cavity and underfloor; where you live (obviously all heating costs more in colder areas); and what your household consumption of energy is like in the first place.

If you live alone and can manage with just a log-burner and no radiators during evenings, you’ll save a lot more than a family of five inhabiting



Whether traditional or modern, your stove must be certified Ecodesign

several rooms at once.

And then there’s the outlay. “Like any cost-saving initiative within the home, a wood-burning stove requires an initial investment for both the burner and its installation,” says Ettan Bazil, founder and chief executive of Help Me Fix ([helpmefix.io](http://helpmefix.io)), a company that helps homeowners and tenants to deal with household issues via videolink. “But once it’s up and running it could well save you some money in the long run.”

Bazil points out that simple comparisons between boiler use and the cost of wood or smokeless fuel are misleading. “We say that the average cost of the kiln-dried logs required for a wood-burning stove comes in at around £90 per month. That’s usually cheaper than a typical monthly outlay for gas and electricity, especially now with

the energy price cap of £2,500 equating to bills averaging out at £208 per month. However, this isn’t quite a like-for-like comparison as a wood-burning stove will struggle to fulfil all of the same day-to-day functions as a boiler.”

### The best ways to start a fire

There are as many ways to start a fire as there are autumn and winter days when dusk falls at 4pm, but Coulthard says the biggest mistake people make is to try to get huge logs going with only the aid of firelighters. “You should always think in three stages: tinder, kindling and then logs.”

For tinder, crunched-up newspaper is ideal; add firelighters for speed, using long matches for safety. Traditional kerosene firelighters are cheap but smell strongly; try natural alternatives instead, such as EcoBlaze (200 for £15.19, [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk)).

Then add tinder, or sticks — these are available from any supermarket, garage or garden centre — or try a local bulk supplier who will deliver. Be generous with your tinder — the hotter the burn at this stage, the more effective and “clean” your fire will be. Never try to pile logs on top of smouldering tinder: it won’t work and will simply fill the room with smoke. Be patient and let the tinder catch first. When you’ve got a blaze going start adding logs, using smaller ones at first, gradually building up in size. Then close the door, sit back and count your pennies. ■

