

Boiling Point



REPORT by *Roisín Moloney*

Consumer Choice investigates the benefits of upgrading your gas boiler system and outlines how much you can expect to pay to do so



At a glance

- **Upgrading your boiler**
- **Understanding quotes**
- **Choosing a contractor**

If you are a consumer of natural gas you've probably been noticing an increase in your bills recently. Unfortunately the increases are not just due to increased consumption over the winter months. In October Bord Gáis increased its domestic gas prices by over 20%, the effects of which are now being painfully felt by already hard pressed consumers.

The instinctive reaction for most consumers to higher utility bills is either to cut consumption or switch supplier. However, using less may not be feasible for many, especially those who are already sacrificing their comfort to lessen bills. Meanwhile gas customers have yet to see a fully competitive natural gas market in full operation thus leaving limited options for switching suppliers.

Upgrading your boiler system is one possibility that can help consumers to tackle high bills. However, it is not without cost although there are some grants available that can help offset the expense.

Why upgrade?

According to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) current day boilers are approximately 90% efficient. This is compared with an estimated level of 70% efficiency of oil or gas boilers that are 15 years old or more. Increasing efficiency by this amount can represent fuel savings of more than 25%. In other words replacing an older, low efficiency boiler with a new high efficiency boiler can cut your fuel bill by up to one quarter. Replacing your boiler can also improve reliability and safety.

Another reason to consider upgrading your boiler comes in the form of a grant under the Better Energy Programme.

Grants are available to homeowners provided their house was built prior to 2006, and that they use a contractor who is active on the registered contractors list at the time of work. Grants are available for eligible applicants for heating systems. A grant of €560 is available for the installation of a high efficiency oil/gas boiler with controls upgrade, while there is a grant of €400 available for heating controls upgrade only. More information on grants is available from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (See *Useful contacts*).

Should I upgrade?

If your boiler is 15 years old or more then it may be worth considering replacing it. In this case you will be planning the replacement and will be in control, giving you the time to get a range of quotations and in turn reduce the cost. This is in contrast to replacing your boiler in a breakdown situation which is likely to be carried out with less research and consideration. Replacement costs tend to be lower in summer and the planned work will avoid a rushed job if the boiler breaks down in the winter months.

Oil or gas?

When replacing a boiler, the first consideration should be about which fuel to use. Generally, you should consider replacing your boiler with one that uses the same fuel. If you have a natural gas supply then it is likely to be the lowest cost option in terms of both installation and running cost. If you don't have a natural gas supply then the choice is between oil, LPG or pellet boilers. For rural areas or areas that are off the national gas grid, oil

or LPG are viable solutions.

Installing a condensing boiler

Condensing boilers are highly efficient boilers. They use less fuel and have lower running costs than other boilers. Higher efficiency levels are made possible by extracting heat contained in the combustion gases, which would otherwise have been lost to the atmosphere.

Since 2008 when installing a replacement oil or gas boiler it is now a requirement for SEAI grants that the boiler be condensing where possible. There are some rare situations where installing one may not be feasible. Condensing boilers have a much higher efficiency than non-condensing boilers.

It is not a requirement to install a condensing boiler if you are not taking advantage of SEAI grants. But while this could save you money initially with installation costs, you will have more expensive running costs.

Where to purchase?

The SEAI HARP (home-heating appliance registrar of performance) database maintains a list of all oil and gas boilers, and their efficiency, that are available on the Irish market. (See www.seai.ie/harp) Usually the installer will also supply the products and labour as part of a package.

Who should I employ to install my boiler?

Get an experienced installer, checking that they have public liability insurance. It is a good idea to check their references too. For gas fired boilers, all work must be carried out by a Registered Gas Installer. The RGII (Registered Gas

SAMPLE GAS BOILER REPLACEMENT COSTS

Company	Price for 3-bed house (€)	Grant deducted?	Afercare?	BER inc?
Airtricity	5,599	No	5 year warranty and up to 4 services	Yes
Electric Ireland	3,985	No	2 year warranty	No
Bord Gáis	3,830 ¹	No	2 year warranty	Yes
RGI in Co. Meath	2,500	No	3 year warranty	No
RGI in South Co. Dublin	2,600	No	3 year warranty	Yes
RGI in Limerick City	2,200	Yes	2 year warranty	No
RGI in Cork City	2,599	No	3 year warranty	Yes
RGI in Dublin 7	2,600	No	5 year	No

NOTE: Survey carried out December 2011. RGI = Registered Gas Installer. All quotes are subject to detailed written quotations. 1. 20% deposit required. €250 discount also available

Installers Ireland) can be contacted (see *Useful contacts*) in order to check that contractors are licensed. Remember that it is illegal for anybody other than a Registered Gas Installer (RGI) to service your boiler.

There is no equivalent regulation for oil fired boilers, however many installers are members of OFTEC (Oil Firing Technical Association Ireland) which can be contacted (see *Useful contacts*). A good installer will be able to size your new boiler based on the actual heating requirements for your home. This will ensure that the boiler operates at its optimum capacity and be most cost effective.

Boiler controls

The other area in your house where there is scope for big improvements is your boiler controls. In fact, SEAI considers this to be so important that you must upgrade your controls to a specified level in order to be eligible for a grant when you replace your old boiler.

Boiler controls offer an excellent way of improving comfort conditions and saving energy. The controls should have two primary functions:

- Deciding when heating comes on and goes off. It is a requirement for new installations that the house be divided into zones (e.g. living area and bedrooms) and to have separate time lock control over each zone.
- Boiler controls should also maintain a pleasant comfort level in the rooms by fitting thermostatic valves to radiators; these valves regulate the radiator heat output to provide a constant temperature in the room.

Where possible it is also desirable to have independent control over space and water heating, so that in order to heat

water in milder weather your boiler can do this without having to heat the radiators and independently of an electrical immersion which is generally more expensive.

SEAI grants for upgrades

There are three types of SEAI grants. For a heating controls upgrade, the grant is €400. If you upgrade to a high efficiency condensing boiler with heating controls upgrade, the amount of the grant is €560. Grant approval must be in place before any purchase of materials or commencement of measures undertaken. Grants are paid after the measures are completed and the contractor has been paid by the homeowner.

The third type of grant available is a once-off grant of €50 available for Building Energy Rating (BER). A BER must be undertaken once a home has had grant aided work completed.

Sourcing quotes

When you see quotes advertised remember some have deducted the SEAI grants and others have not. Some larger companies have deducted further discounts from the advertised quotes, but these discounts may only apply before a certain date or a limited number of customers. Some quotes include a BER cert and others do not. In order to compare prices you must investigate these quotes further to find out what is actually being offered.

As our price survey shows there are major differences in prices charged between different companies and so shopping around for quotes is crucial. However getting a comparable quote can be difficult with the array of offers given by different companies. This is further

complicated because some of the listed prices have deducted the available grants while others have not. When going in search of a quote go armed with enough information to ask the right questions. The option of finance is available from some larger suppliers, however this often means a higher price. Also credit union personal loans may work out cheaper than finance options when you have the freedom to shop around for quotes. SEAI grants are deducted from the original price with the larger companies. With smaller companies the customer must pay up front and once the work is completed the SEAI grant will be paid to you.

Servicing your boiler

Even if you are not going to replace your boiler or controls, make sure you get it serviced regularly. It is recommended that both new and old boilers should be serviced annually. There are both safety benefits and energy efficiency benefits to servicing your boiler. According to the SEAI an annual service improves efficiency by 10% and saves up to €150 each year. Regular servicing also helps to detect safety issues and reliability problems early on.

As above, your gas boiler should only be serviced by a RGI as he/she will have the required competency and experience to deal with the servicing, repair and setup of gas appliances. The RGI also checks if the boiler is correctly installed and operating in a suitable environment. It is recommended that customers contact at least three RGI's to compare costs, quality and service issues before entering any contract. And remember, you do not have to use an installer that is linked to your supplier - you are free to choose any registered installer.

Useful contacts

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland

Tel 1850927000
www.seai.ie/Grants

Registered Gas Installers Ireland

Tel 1850632632
www.rgii.ie

Oil Firing Technical Association Ireland

Tel 018646637
www.OFTEC.org