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CONSUMERS WOULD GIVE IDS GREEN LIGHT TO OVERHAUL WINTER FUEL PAYMENTS

Consumers would give Iain Duncan Smith a green light to overhaul the winter fuel allowance, according to research from uSwitch.com, the independent price comparison and switching service.

Over eight in ten (82%) would like to see winter fuel payments restricted to those living in the UK^[1], while the high profile campaign by wealthier, celebrity 'pensioners', such as Joanna Lumley and Esther Rantzen, has also touched a nerve. Two thirds of consumers (66%) think that people should be allowed to opt-out of winter fuel payments if they can afford their energy bills without them^[1]. At the moment, those who don't need the cash cannot give it back.

Currently the allowance goes to anyone born on or before 5th July, 1951. However, almost half of consumers (49%) want winter fuel payments to be means tested, while almost six in ten think health should be taken into account as well as age (58%)^[1]. With households battling with the rising cost of living, over half (55%) also think that payments should automatically increase in line with inflation^[1].

Ann Robinson, Director of Consumer Policy at uSwitch.com, says: "With household energy bills at a record-high, winter fuel payments can be a life-line for state pensioners struggling to get by. Our research shows overwhelming support for the allowance to continue, but a growing recognition that payments could be better targeted at those who actually need the extra help.

"Almost seven in ten households (69%) went without heating at some point over the winter to keep their energy costs down^[2], while over a third of people (35%) say that cutting back on energy usage is affecting their quality of life or health – up from 15% last year^[3]. Limiting winter fuel payments to those living in the UK and giving wealthier recipients the right to opt-out could prove popular moves and would put more money in the kitty for those in greater hardship."

For more information visit www.uSwitch.com or call 0800 093 06 07

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Notes to editors:

Research was carried out with the uSwitch.com Consumer Opinion Panel amongst 2,099 respondents in January 2013.

1. In response to: "Which of the following statements do you agree with – choose all that apply?" 82.2% said that 'winter fuel payments should only be paid to those living in the UK', 57.6% agreed that 'eligibility should be based on health as well as age', 65.8% agreed that 'people should have the option to opt out of winter fuel payments if they can afford their energy bills without it', 48.6% agreed that 'the winter fuel allowance should be means tested (i.e. paid according to income), 55.3% agreed they "should automatically increase in line with inflation."
2. In response to: 'Have you gone without heating this winter to keep your energy costs down?' 50.6% said 'occasionally', 16.5% said 'regularly', 1.7% said 'always'. This adds up to 68.8% who went without heating at some point this winter.
3. In response to: 'Do you think you're achieving the right balance this winter between keeping your home warm and managing costs?' 34.9% said 'No – the cutbacks I'm making are affecting my quality of life and/or health.' Last year's findings come from research conducted with the uSwitch.com Opinion Panel amongst 1,225 respondents in January 2012.

About us

uSwitch.com is a free, impartial, online and telephone-based comparison and switching service, helping consumers compare prices on gas, electricity, water, heating cover, home telephone, broadband, digital television, mobile phones and personal finance products including mortgages, credit cards, current accounts and insurance. In 2010 uSwitch.com celebrated ten years of saving customers money.

uSwitch.com is the first comparison website to achieve the Plain English Campaign's Internet Crystal Mark, which is recognised as a standard that a website has clear language, is accessible and easy to use, and has been tested on a sample of its users.

uSwitch.com is dedicated to helping consumers save money whether they have internet access or not. It offers a dedicated call centre, manned by uSwitch customer service representatives, as well as a freepost 'Send us your bill' service, whereby customers can post their latest energy bills with their telephone number to FREEPOST USWITCH, to get a free call back from a dedicated customer services representative. The service is also available via fax, email and post. Consumers should fax 0203 214 8417, email CustomerServices@uswitch.com or write to Customer Services, uSwitch.com, Centro 3, 19 Mandela Street, London, NW1 0DU with their postcode and usage details.

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