

Energy Live Q&A - Thursday January 27, 2011 (12.30pm - 3.30pm)

Transcript of Which? Live Event at <http://www.which.co.uk/environment-and-saving-energy/energy/reviews-ns/energy-live-qanda---which-member-exclusive/>

12:30: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Hello - and welcome to the very first Which? live energy Q&A! Thanks for joining us.

12:31: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Our team of energy experts are gearing up to answer your questions on all things energy-related...

12:31: [Comment From David] Hello Kelly

12:31: [Comment From David] Ki Kelly, Shall I ask my question now?

12:32: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Hi David - yes please, go ahead!

12:34: Kelly Fenn - Which?: On our panel of energy experts today, we have...

12:34: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hello, I'm an online writer researcher here at Which? I recently led our energy monitor test and am interested in all consumer energy issues. Looking forward to some questions...

12:34: Joanne Lezmore - Which Legal Service: Hi I am a solicitor at Which? Legal Service so let us know if you have any consumer problems with your energy suppliers. I am looking forward to receiving your queries

12:35: Fiona Cochrane - Which?: Hi I'm Fiona, I lead the energy policy team at Which? I've your any questions about the running of the energy market - from switching, bills and price announcements- so let me know if you've any questions.

12:35: Sylvia: Hello! I'm Sylvia and work as an energy researcher at Which? I'm looking forward to your questions.

12:35 Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Good afternoon, my name is Tom Yeomans and I work for Which? Switch. I will be able to help with questions relating to tariffs and energy providers as well as switching advice. Looking forward to your questions.

12:36: [Comment From Mr P. Birdi] I am currently with Eon Price protection until April 2011.

12:37: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi Mr Birdi, are you happy with your tariff?

12:44: [Comment From Mr P. Birdi] I am currently with EON price protection until April 2011, on quarterly paper billing, and getting Tesco Clubcard points. I want to know whether I should stay with EON and get an online deal & pay by D. Debit, or change to another company for a much better deal and all the hassle of changing and all the time it takes. Look forward to your views and advice. Regards.

12:44: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Hi Mr Birdi, by switching to payment by DD with E.on you will receive a further 8% discount on your bills, which will definitely be advisable in the short term.

I would not recommend switching within your contract term as a cancellation fee applies for this tariff. The switching process can take between 6 to 8 weeks but you should not instigate this until your current contract finishes.

However, as soon as your contract ends I would advise looking in to switching as you will likely be moved to E.on's Standard tariff, even with an online and Direct Debit discount this tariff still works out £200 more expensive than the most competitive deal. Please visit <http://www.which.co.uk/switch> to see the best deals in your energy region.

12:45 Kelly Fenn - Which?: We've had a question if from Liz, asking: Hi My question is: Is it worth getting an energy tariff that comes with a free[...] energy monitor, or are they all really expensive?

12:45 Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi Liz, good question! We actually looked into 'free energy monitor tariffs' recently and found that often they are often pretty poor value - we found that in some cases we could save more than £150 by choosing the cheapest online deal available and buying a Best Buy energy monitor separately. You can see which energy monitors we rate as Best Buys here - <http://www.which.co.uk/environment-and-saving-energy/energy/reviews/energy-monitors/>

12:45 Sylvia: Hi Liz I would also add that it also depends what you do with your energy monitor. The idea is that by keeping an eye on your monitor you will be able to see where you can save more energy in your house. If you use it well and change your behaviour as a result it could save you money.

12:48: [Comment From Robert] My dual fuel contract with Sainsburys (EDF) recently finished and I have been put on Edf's standard charge. Recently, I did a 'switch with Which?' which suggested that I would be cheaper switching to Eon. (Based on my figures) However, Edf have promised a price freeze until 01/03/2011. Would I be better waiting for my next bill and then compare in April OR switch now?

12:48: Fiona Cochrane - Which?: Hi Robert, EDF have indeed frozen their prices on some of their products until March. However if the Switch site indicates that you could still save money it might be worth switching and getting cheaper rates over the colder months. If you're happy with EDF it might be worth exploring if there is a cheaper tariff with them but if not Which? Switch does look at all the available tariffs on the market. Something that is always worth considering is going online and paying by DD as this often provides the cheapest option.

12:53 [Comment From David] We live in a 1980s block built house, concrete tiles, and have warm air central heating. Would the experts be able to advise what we could do to improve the efficiency of our heating system as it is now fairly old. Would they advise replacing with another warm air boiler, if so which manufacturer?

12:53: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Thanks for your question David. Everyone's heating system is different, so without someone qualified to assess it visiting your home it's impossible to make a recommendation. And unfortunately warm air boilers aren't something we've tested before. But do beware that whatever boiler or heat source you go for, it's critical to consider the system as a whole, rather than just replacing the boiler with no analysis of how it works with the rest of the system. Aside from a few circumstances, new boilers must be of the condensing type.

12:54: [Comment From Robert] Thanks Fiona, I'll look at EDF for a cheaper option but as you suggest, another 'switch' comparison might be better. I pay by DD already.

12:55: Kelly Fenn - Which?: We've had a question from Graham - he's asking: Hi Everyone....Graham here. I'm just coming to the end of my current deal with Scottish Power - Online Fixed Price Energy 2011 (No Standing Charge) - due to finish at the end of next month. I've been very pleased with this 3 yr deal and looking at 'Switch with Which?' and a few other comparison sites, it looks like Scottish Power's 'Online Energy Saver 12' is best to go for. Just wondered what you experts thought about it?

12:56: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Hi Graham, I'm pleased to hear you were happy with your deal from Scottish Power. If you were happy with their level of service and billing system then staying with the provider could be a good for you, it is certainly the most competitive tariff at the moment.

Please note that the Online Energy Saver 12 is a variable rate tariff, it guarantees to remain a minimum of 2% below their standard rates. This means that the rates for this tariff may increase over the 12 month period. Energy suppliers have raised their prices in the winter period for the last three years and as such you may receive a large bill for the next winter period.

There are some competitive fixed price deals that might be of interest to you. Atlantic have scored well in our recent Customer Satisfaction Survey and their Atlantic Fixed Price 3 is still quite competitive. EDF's Fixed Saver tariff may also be of interest to you but EDF were second from bottom for customer satisfaction in our recent survey. I hope this helps you make a decision.

12:57: [Comment From andy maxwell] I have thirty downlighters in the house with a 50 watt GU10 in each. I want to replace them with led equivalents , but am unsure which are the best buy, as the feedback on such sites as amazon etc, can be conflicting. Should I wait until the technology improves ?

12:57: Sylvia: Hello Andy Whilst LED will save you a bit more energy than the current low energy lightbulbs, there are still relatively expensive. That said, prices are coming down and Which? will be releasing testing results of LEDs this year. Please email us your email address to live@which.co.uk and we will let you know when the results are out. In the mean time you can find the results of our last energy saving light bulb tests here: <http://www.which.co.uk/environment-and-saving-energy/energy/reviews-ns/energy-saving-light-bulbs/test-results/>.

12:59: [Comment From David Weddle] I have two questions. First one. I have a Baxi combi boiler about 10 years old supplying our central heating. I believe it is a 32kW unit. Is it financially worth changing it for a new condensing boiler?

12:59: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi David Weddle, it's tricky with boilers as an awful lot depends on your home and heating systems. However, as a very rough guide - assuming you're quoted £2,500 for your new boiler and installation, the overall payback time for your boiler would work out at just over ten years when you factor in energy bill savings of up to £235 a year (which is what the EST estimates you'll save by replacing an inefficient boiler and fitting heating controls). We've got advice on how to buy the best boiler here - <http://www.which.co.uk/home-and-garden/heating-water-and-electricity/guides/how-to-buy-the-best-boiler/>

13:00: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Wow - some great questions coming through so far - keep 'em coming!

13:00 POLL: Have you ever experienced any of these problems?

Energy supplier not reading your meter
(8%)

Receiving an incorrect or confusing bill
(67%)

Being rolled on to a different tariff
(8%)

Being mis-sold to by a doorstep seller
(8%)

Difficulty while switching
(0%)

Problem with a contract
(8%)

13:01: [Comment From Richard] Hi, I switched with W? Switch ages ago from one of the big six to EBICO. I've never looked back - great customer service and lower bills. EBICO are not for profit. So how come there aren't more EBICOs in the market? - i.e. more not for profit companies?

13:01: Fiona Cochrane - Which?: Hi Richard, that's great to hear that you are happy with your supplier, unfortunately many people aren't. There are a couple of things that might prevent others doing which Ebico have done, it's expensive to set up an energy supply company, although there is work going on to help support new entrants onto the market. As to the Not for Profit, I suspect that many who think of entering the market are focused on the profit side of it and aren't thinking of it as a mechanism for delivering a charitable aim. But it is good that Ebico to give consumers that option.

13:05: [Comment From David Weddle]

I am just about to order some photo voltaic cells for my roof. I have spent a lot of time researching the subject but one area I have been unable to discover is whether there is any significant lifetime difference between mono crystalline and poly crystalline cells apart from a small efficiency improvement in the former. For example longevity, reliability etc

13:05: Sylvia: Hello David things can be quite confusing in the PV world... As this is quite a technical question, I would recommend you contact the Solar Trade Association on 01908 442290 who should be able to find a technical expert. The Energy Saving Trust might also be a good source of information. If you are concerned about longevity and lifetime, you might want to pay careful attention to the inverter which tends to be the part of the system that fails first.

13:10 [Comment From Rich W] I am renting a property at the moment. If I switch my energy supplier for Gas & Electric, do I have to sign a 1 year contract? If so will I get penalised if I move house within a year?

13:10: Fiona Cochrane - Which?: Hi Rich, when you switch supplier you don't always need to sign up for a year. However if you decide that the tariff for you does have a 1 year sign up, check what the exit fee is as it might still be financially worth switching, even if you don't last the year and have to pay the exit fee. Hope that helps.

13:11: [Comment From David Weddle] Hazel, the payback time you quoted, what sort of efficiency will I be getting from the 10 year old combi boiler.

13:11: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi David Weddle, if you can get some details from your boiler, you can find out its efficiency on the Sedbuk website - using its boiler efficiency database <http://www.sedbuk.com/>

13:12 [Comment From Deborah Stickland] Hi Energy Team - I'm an EDF and British Gas customer on standard electricity and gas tariffs which I pay each supplier quarterly when the bill arrives i.e. not by DD. I'm happy with both companies but wonder which is best for dual fuel - EDF or British Gas? (I haven't considered the other potential suppliers yet and I don't want to pay by direct debit). Thanks

13:12 Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Hi Deborah, this will depend on your usage and energy region so it would be worth putting in your exact data to <http://www.which.co.uk/switch> to see what would work out best for you.

EDF currently have the most competitive Dual Fuel tariff payable by Quarterly Bill in Online S@ver 8. This is a variable rate tariff and EDF are set to raise their prices around April. As such I would recommend looking at their Fixed S@ver tariff.

If you would be interested in switching provider then Ebico's Equipower Dual Fuel tariff is also very competitive for this payment method and have a very good customer satisfaction score, as mentioned above by Richard.

British Gas are not currently very competitive and scored only 45% in our Customer Satisfaction Survey (compared to Ebico's score of 72%)

13:12: [Comment From Rich W] Thanks Fiona, I'll be sure to check for any extra fees.

13:13: [Comment From David Weddle] Sylvia, many thanks, that site looks useful.

13:14: [Comment From Deborah Stickland] Thanks Team - very helpful.

13:17: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Just a quick note: if you've not seen your question appear yet, please bear with us! All comments are moderated, so not all your questions will appear immediately. We're trying our best to get through them as quickly as possible...

13:18: [Comment From Richard] Thanks Fiona, feeling a bit naive now! The difference between EBICO and my previous energy suppliers is night and day.

13:19: [Comment From Robert] My boiler is approx. 18 years old and am considering replacing it with a condenser of the same type. My service engineer has told me that he can keep my present boiler operational for another 5 years but by changing, I would benefit from at least 25% on heating/hot water gas bills. The cost would be 2 to 2.5k depending on fixtures and fittings. The boiler switch would be fairly straight forward. What is your advise and how long would it take to recoup this outlay?

13:19: [Comment From Robert] I have just read the Q from David and your reply. I can now see this also applies to me.

13:19: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi Robert - yes you're right - you've got a similar issue as David - a lot depends on the size of your home, your heating system and the type of boiler you are replacing and any annual saving quotes will be a very rough guide. However the EST has a good table here - <http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/Home-improvements-and-products/Heating-and-hot-water> - which shows you how much you could save on your energy bills by replacing your boiler with a new A-rated condensing boiler and installing heating controls. - this should help you work out the time it would take to recoup your costs.

13:20: [Comment From Sigi]

I am planning to buy an old property. It has an old gas boiler' an Ideal NF40 - I think the boiler is about 17 years old. Still in working order. Is that worth while replacing with a condensing Vaillant EcoTec?

13:20 Sylvia: Hello Sigi, New condensing Vaillant EcoTec boilers are between 88 and 90% efficient. To calculate if it worth switching to one, we would need to know the efficiency of the current boiler. You say it is an Ideal gas boiler. I would need the exact model reference and as much other information as possible (wall or floor mounted?). Maybe we can look at this offline, please email me the details to live@which.co.uk and I will follow it up. Thanks.

13:21: [Comment From David Weddle] Sylvia, thanks I have tried these associations. What I find is that advice comes from two sources. One is sales/trade based and they cannot answer questions such as these. The other is experts and it is difficult to understand what they mean and they also tend to pepper their answers with caveats. I know about the inverter but at least it is easily accessed and repairable whereas neither applies to the cells. Thanks for the comments.

13:22: [Comment From Robert] Thanks Hazel, I'll have a look.

13:23: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Hi Graham, I can give you a rough idea however energy rates are dependant on your region and your bill will obviously depend on your usage. Atlantic Fixed Price 3 is around 10% more expensive than SP's Online Energy Saver 12 based on an average consumption of 16500 kWh for gas and 3300 kWh for electricity. EDF works out around 15% more expensive.

13:25: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Sorry, Graham that was in response to your comment which has not yet been published.

13:25: [Comment From Graham] Tom...thanks for your advice, and appreciate the fact that 'Online Energy Saver 12' is a variable rate tariff. I know when I took out my current (fixed rate) tariff, it was at an (approx.) additional cost of some 10% above the cheapest variable rate at that time. Guess I need to see what the figures (differentials) are at today's prices, unless you can give me a rough idea?

13:28: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Has anyone got any questions they'd like to ask on energy monitors? Or has anyone used an energy monitor before?

13:36: [Comment From David Weddle] Have to leave but just wanted to thank you all. I have learned a lot.

13:41: Kelly Fenn - Which?: What does everyone think about the Q&A so far - any topics you're keen to see covered that haven't been yet?

13:42: [Comment From Robert] Very informative

13:43: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Glad to hear it - any more qs, please do send them in...

13:44: [Comment From Frank Molyneux] I am currently involved in a complaint with EON on two matters. We have a holiday home which is let for about 40 weeks each year, one of our meters has been mis-read since its installation on 29/01/07, only 5 digit readings have been allowed, it now transpires they should have been 6 digit readings. I had provisionally agreed with EON that they could back bill 12 months on my current domestic tariff, when they ascertained it was a holiday home EON stated I should have been paying business tariffs and now want to back bill me for 6 years, a sum of £3,744!

13:44: Joanne Lezmore - Which Legal Service: Hello Mr Molyneux
I am sorry to hear of the problems you are experiencing with EON. Firstly you should try and challenge EON as to whether a holiday home not let all of the time is indeed a "business" i.e. get them to define this. You may have better success with such a challenge if you use the property yourself for part of the year. However, before doing this, in some cases, commercial use is less than domestic use so also ask them the difference in tariff. If deemed as a domestic property they will be bound by the one year agreement made. If you are not happy with their decision you can refer the matter to the Energy Ombudsman.

13:45: [Comment From Robert] As a possible point of interest. I was not happy with the position of my control thermostat for the house heating. My service engineer suggested I install a remote control which can be portable or fixed. This I had done and once put through it's trials, have found it very useful, efficient and cost effective as I can regulate 7 time/temperature setting throughout the day plus a manual override if I need extra heat, etc.

13:45: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi Robert - that sounds great - anything that puts you in better control of your energy use is a good tool for saving money. Getting a decent set of heating controls - that allow you to program by day and hour - is a good idea for anyone looking to save on their bills.

13:46: [Comment From maria] Are any energy providers British Owned

13:46: Fiona Cochrane - Which?: Hi Maria, of the Big 6 energy suppliers there are two companies that could be classed as British owned- British Gas and Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE). The remaining four are spread across Spain, France and Germany. There are a number of smaller energy suppliers many, if not all, of which are British owned.

13:47: [Comment From David Sissons] I have a medium/large house with an old (class F) gas boiler. I need to change to a modern condenser boiler, and also change my energy supplier. Which should I do first?

13:47: Sylvia: Hello David Sissons. I would recommend you change your boiler first simply because your new boiler will be much more efficient than your old one. As a result you should be using less fuel (I assume it is gas?). The cheapest tariff will be dependent on your fuel consumption, so best to wait and see what you consume with your new boiler. Then, go to Which? Switch (<http://www.which.co.uk/switch>), enter your bill information and the site will find you the cheapest tariffs for you.

13:48: [Comment From Dinty] I am a customer of e.on. I was on their fixonline plan that ended on 1st December 2010. They then changed it to their energyonline plan. After going to price comparison website I found that e.on's saveonline 4 plan would be better for me. Why don't energy companies automatically change you to their best plan (after all they better than anyone else know how much energy you use) and why are there so many confusing plans and prices?

13:48: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Hi Dinty, thank you for your comment. In a strange way energy providers are almost doing you a favour in moving customers to their standard rates. This is because, although the rates are higher, standard tariffs do not have any cancellation fees or tie in periods. As such the minimum amount of time you need to stay on that tariff is just 28 days. SaveOnline 5 is now the most competitive tariff from E.on if you wish to stay with your current provider. If you are interested in switching then please visit <http://www.which.co.uk/switch> to find the most competitive tariff for your usage. The energy market can be a confusing place with a multitude of tariffs available. If you are looking for a simple provider then Ebico may be of interest to you. It is a not-for-profit company that only has one Dual Fuel tariff, EquiPower. This tariff has one rate for electricity and one for gas, no standing charges or tiers, to make your bills as transparent as possible. I hope this helps you make a decision in a very crowded market.

13:50: [Comment From David Sissons] Very many thanks, Sylvia. Signing off.

13:55: [Comment From Stan] How can I participate ?

13:56: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Hi Stan - one of our experts is looking into your question right now, we'll post an answer as soon as possible.

13:56: [Comment From Robert] Thank you all for this very useful live Q&A. Till the next time.

13:57: [Comment From Stan] Hello, I have been a loyal Customer to SSE for several years now. They have lived up to my expectations with good service. My Go 2 contract ends on 31 Jan. SSE have suggested their standard online.

13:57: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Hi Stan, I am glad that you have received a good service from SSE, they are consistently ranked the best of the "Big 6" suppliers in our Customer Satisfaction Survey. Their standard tariff is not the most competitive on offer, if you are looking to stay with SSE then I would suggest asking about their Price Fix 5 March 2012 tariff. If you are interested in moving suppliers please have a look at the results of our Customer Satisfaction Survey at <http://www.which.co.uk/switch/energy-advice/customer-satisfaction-survey-results> and visit Which? Switch for the cheapest deals available to you.

13:58: [Comment From Graham] I'd be very interested if Robert could supply some further details, e.g. price/name/where it can be purchased, on the 'portable' room thermostat that his engineer had advised him on. Our (old) Honeywell room 'stat is not ideally placed where it currently resides. I presume a portable room 'stat must be wireless in operation, so there must be some work required to be done on the boiler itself?

13:59: [Comment From Dinty] Thanks that information Tom, however having been with e.on for 8 years I feel they were relying on customer inertia when they could have given me a number of options and the best deal automatically with a period of 28 days to change if I wanted.

14:00: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Dinty, I agree that energy companies rely heavily on customer inertia and are not particularly forthcoming with information on saving you money. Luckily this is exactly why Which? Switch was created :)

14:00: [Comment From Harry] Hazel - will an energy monitor actually save me money? How long will it take me to recoup the initial outlay?

14:00: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi Harry, that's a good question. An energy monitor itself won't save you money by itself - it will only highlight where you are using lots of electricity and where you could cut down. How much money you save on your bills is all down to you - and what you do to reduce your usage - and it depends on how energy-conscious you are already. Having said that, the EST reckons you could save 5-15% on your annual bills though, by using an energy monitor - which is £25-£75 on a £500 bill. We tested energy monitors to see which are the best - and our top scoring model - the Efergy Elite - cost just £35. So I suppose you could recoup the initial outlay for this in less than a year if you made the most of what it showed you...

14:03: [Comment From Stan] Thanks Tom. The Price Fix 5 is not mentioned on their site. I would consider moving if another supplier offers a better tariff.

14:04: POLL: Have you ever switched gas and electricity supplier?

Yes, I've switched several times
(33%)

Yes, I've switched once
(33%)

Yes, I've switched once but wouldn't do it again
(0%)

I'm thinking about switching
(17%)

No, I've never switched before
(17%)

14:04: [Comment From Dinty] I thought the AgeUK prices would be better value than e.on's other ones. However this is not the case. Are they taking advantage of elderly customers? And not that I will change but what is the minimum age for Age uk prices please?

14:04: Fiona Cochrane - Which?: We can't comment on the specifics of this case. However regarding social tariffs in general- they don't have to be the cheapest on offer from that energy supplier. We have discussed this with Government as we think that the social tariffs, which are aimed at the vulnerable and/or fuel poor, should be at the best rates the supplier can offer.

14:09: [Comment From norman] I am at present on the EONSaveOnline2 with price rises due on 4th Feb 2011 my annual usage is 3676KWH Electricity and 20406 KWH Gas. Is this still the best deal for me? Has EON any intention of closing this tariff SaveOnline 2 and switching customers to a more expensive deal

14:09: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Hi Norman, unfortunately I think SaveOnline 2 has already closed and been moved to E.on's Standard rates. You should have received some information with your bill regarding price increases although the law currently states they do not have to notify you of these changes before they happen. Which? is currently campaigning to get this law changed to make it fair to the consumer. E.on's current cheapest deal is SaveOnline 5 which will stay 6% cheaper than their Standard rates until 1st April 2012. You should be able to request a move to this through Eon directly. Energy rates depend on your location and so I would encourage you to visit <http://www.which.co.uk/switch> to see the best deal in your energy region if you are inclined to switch provider.

14:12: [Comment From Stan] Thanks for lead Tom; I'll refer the Price Fix tariff back to the supplier and look at their response.

14:15: [Comment From Richard] Am I right in having the suspicion that energy companies behave rather like banks in chasing after new customers all the time at the expense of existing ones, so loyalty is not rewarded? Do you ever get mobile phone contract-style discounts on renewal with energy companies for example?

14:16: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi Richard - yes it often appears that way! And their attitude towards existing customers makes me wonder why so many people put up with their existing tariffs and don't switch to a cheaper deal. I've personally never seen any proper 'loyalty discounts' offered by energy suppliers - and would be shocked if energy companies did anything to proactively reward existing customers. However, if you call them up and mention leaving, then they might be willing to offer a cheaper deal.

p.s. Some energy companies claim to offer 'loyalty bonuses' if you switch to a new tariff and pay by direct debit for a year or so - however these are really introductory bonuses as they are one-off - and they are often included in the 'annual price' quote for the tariff cost anyway

p.p.s We've been campaigning for energy suppliers to let customers know when a cheaper version of their tariff is available - but, unsurprisingly, they seem quite reluctant to do this!

14:18: [Comment From Graham] You asked earlier about anyone using an Energy Monitor. We've had one sat on one of the worktops in the kitchen for some 18 months. I wouldn't say it has saved us any money as we were already ensuring that we were being as frugal as we could with our electricity usage, e.g. not leaving appliances on standby / fitted low energy light bulbs etc. It is left on the setting that gives an instant (real time) readout of electricity usage and is a constant reminder to make sure we turn off anything that's not required. It acts a bit like a policeman I guess :-). The unit we have is from 'Eco-Eye'.

14:18: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi Dave, Is it the Eco-eye Elite? That one did well in our tests. I like the idea of it acting as an energy policeman!

14:19: [Comment From Stan] On the latest communique from SSE, they have tagged at the bottom their 'estimate' of total energy consumption followed by an estimate of my spend next year £470. Incredible? but wrong!

14:20: [Comment From norman] I have checked with EON and Which switch independently and both say that the SaveOnline2 is the most competitive I am confused are you sure the Eon SaveOnline plan is the best one

14:20: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Hi Norman, Eon are likely to say they have the most competitive tariff as they are trying to sell their services to you. They are not lying to you as SaveOnline 5 is the most competitive tariff within Eon. However, if you were to visit an independent energy comparison site, such as <http://www.which.co.uk/switch>, you will be able to see a complete view of the market. This will show you the best deal across suppliers, for example, based on an average usage in the Eastern energy region, Scottish Power's Online Energy Saver 12 works out £80 cheaper than Eon SaveOnline 5 over the year.

14:21: [Comment From Catherine] our gas central heating pipework has just sprung a leak under the concrete floors and I am frantically trying to find the best way to go - either stay with the gas boiler and get new pipework installed, or - (and I am tempted by this) - go to electric central heating. Any advice on this would be greatly appreciated, as I am about to get quotes today! But don't know anything about electric heating.

14:21: Sylvia: Hello Catherine. The same thing happened to my neighbour actually, how bizarre... Getting the pipework repaired under a concrete floor could be quite expensive. That said, it depends how big your house/flat is and how well insulated it is. Generally, it is cheaper to have gas central heating than electric. But if your home was a small well insulated flat with low energy bills, then electric heating could be considered. I would suggest that you should get quotes to fix the leak first and check how much you are currently spending on gas. Then compare this to the cost of acquiring and running electrical heating.

If you have a large house, it might be cheaper to fix the leak and stay with gas. Which? also has a guide on electric heating:
<http://www.which.co.uk/environment-and-saving-energy/energy/guides/home-heating-systems/electric-central-heating/>

14:24: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Norman, sorry for the confusion. You are correct, SaveOnline 2 rates will be valid until 31st August 2011 and after that date you will be moved to the standard rates. Switching can take up to 6 to 8 weeks so depending on any cancellations fees present it may be worth looking into switching soon.

14:26: Kelly Fenn - Which?: By the looks of our poll results, there's some savvy serial switchers out there! How have people found the switching process as a whole?

14:28: [Comment From Catherine] I have just noticed on British Gas' website that they have joined up with Nectar on their reward scheme, so that should be an interesting bonus, hopefully.

14:28: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi Catherine - yes this is good news for British Gas customers - although they still need to make sure they are on the best deal - Nectar points are a nice bonus but many customers could save £100s by switching from a standard tariff to an online deal.

Did you also see that British Gas has joined up with Sainsbury's to offer new deals and services? They haven't announced the details yet but we'll be looking at these closely to see if the offer good value...

<http://www.which.co.uk/news/2011/01/nectar-card-customers-shut-out-in-the-cold-243012/>

14:33: [Comment From Graham] Hi Hazel...err...did you mean me, Graham. If so, it's the 'Eco-Eye Mini' that we have. It's functionality is identical to the 'Elite', just physically smaller, but still an easy-to-read display.

14:34: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Ooops sorry Graham I got confused! Ah we didn't test the Mini - but sounds good. Does it have any historical functions, and if so do you use them? (ie. electricity consumed last week/month etc)

14:35: [Comment From Graham] For me, the switching has been fine without any problems. I've switched from standard to online tariff with British Gas and at the same time switched from Southern Electricity (as it was then) to British Gas, thus moving over to a dual fuel contract. Then in 2008 I switched to Scottish Power, also for a dual fuel deal. End of next month my current contract ends, so I'll be looking to switch again. Might stay with 'SP', depends on the deals they have on offer!

14:38: Kelly Fenn - Which?: To those just joining us, we've had loads of great questions so far, so please hang in there while we work through them, we will get to your query!

14:38: [Comment From Catherine] Hi Sylvia, Thanks for the reply - I have a 2 bed bungalow and it is well insulated (cavity wall and loft), the emergency insurance homecover came out today and said they would happily dig up the concrete floors in the hall and living room (messy and disruptive) and fix the pipes, but could not guarantee that it wouldn't spring a leak further along the pipework in the floor, as it goes for the weakest point and tends to break through again sooner rather than later. Bearing this in mind I thought re-routing the pipework in the loft is less messy and, then again, just thought the electric wiring would be about the same amount of work for electric heating. With this in mind - any further ideas or suggestions gratefully received , thanks

14:39: Sylvia: Hi Catherine If the repairs are covered by your insurance it might be worth repairing and sticking to gas. Ask the contractor if the pipework is in a good state. if not, you might also want to consider, while the floor is being dugged up, replacing the pipework with a new one. That should then last you for quite a while without having to switch to electric.

Check also your current gas bill and keep in mind that electricity tariffs are quite high at the moment.

All the best!

14:42: [Comment From Catherine] Thanks Sylvia - will get going on that and just hope the weather doesn't get any colder in the meantime!

14:42: [Comment From Stan] Signing out. Thanks for useful comments.

14:43: [Comment From Rose] I'd like to know whether it's worth taking out a boiler service contract? My boiler is getting old and I'm wondering if now might be a good time to be covered in case of breakdown? In the past my Vaillant boiler has been pretty good but I've seen some good deals from British Gas on boiler servicing.

14:43: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Hi Rose, when we've surveyed Which? members about how much they pay for services and repairs we find that most people wouldn't save money by having a servicing contract.

Having said that most people tell us they have a contract because it gives them peace of mind rather than to save money and if that sounds like you, you can check out our review of boiler servicing contracts and see who our members are most satisfied with at www.which.co.uk/boilercontracts, including British Gas.

Hope that helps!

14:45: [Comment From Catherine] That's interesting about BGas and Sainsburys - will have a look at that. You are right about the savings on a better tariff. That said, it always seems to change so fast. I am on BGas Essentials tariff and can never be certain if I'm getting a better deal on the social tariff or an online one. That said I often phone up BGas and ask someone to work it out for me! They can be quite helpful, if you ask them.

14:45: Fiona Cochrane - Which?: Hi Catherine, I'm glad to hear that you've had good service from BG. As to social tariffs, it isn't unusual to find that online, DD tariffs are cheaper than social tariffs- something we don't agree with and have discussed with Government.

You also can't always switch to a social tariff via a switching site, which means a bit of leg work is required. It is worth checking the key features of the social tariff- the rates (pence per kwh), any tiers or blocks these apply to, discounts and fees, and then comparing this to what you find is on offer on a switching site. I'm sorry that it's not as straightforward but it should allow you to make the most informed choice.

14:47: [Comment From Andy] Why does energy, which is bought in a global market, differ according to region ?

14:47: Fiona Cochrane - Which?: Hi Andy, the reason it varies across GB is because of the different cost of running the distribution networks. Because these are monopolies they are price regulated but they do vary between regions.

14:49: [Comment From Graham] Hazel, the 'Mini' does have historical functions, but we don't use them. Not convinced as to the accuracy of the historical data, to be honest. I know the company were talking about developing some software that could be installed on a p.c. to make better use....and understanding maybe!....of the historical data. I haven't visited their website for a while, but it wasn't available the last time I looked.

14:49: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Yeah when we looked at them recently Eco-eye wasn't offering the option to download info to a PC - but other companies are and it would be great if Eco-eye do release this software soon.

14:56 POLL: Have you ever considered switching to a green electricity tariff?

Yes, and I have switched
(25%)

Yes, but they're too expensive
(25%)

Yes, but I'm unsure how green it actually is
(50%)

No, I'm not interested

(0%)

14:57: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Hi folks, just to let you know that we're here today until 3.30pm, so you've still got time to get your questions in...

15:10: [Comment From Steven] I'm considering installing solar (thermal) panels at home. Will the feed-in tariff scheme give me money for this technology? Thanks

15:10: Sylvia: Hello Steven Actually feed-in-tariffs cover electricity generating technologies only, not heat. So they only cover photovoltaics (PV) panels and not solar water heating, otherwise known as solar thermal.

At present there is no financial help available towards the cost of solar water heating systems. However, the government is planning to introduce some form of support through the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme from June this year, but it has not yet confirmed that solar water heating will be eligible, nor from what date.

We'll expect an announcement shortly and will put news on Which? website. In the mean time, you can find more information here: <http://www.which.co.uk/environment-and-saving-energy/energy/guides/how-to-buy-solar-panels/>.

15:15: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Just a word of warning, the Q&A will be shutting shop in around 15 mins, so get your last questions in now please and we'll try to answer as many of them as we can.

15:15: [Comment From james russell]
we are on economy 7 and would like to change to economy 10 but none of the major suppliers say they don't supply economy 10. the recent cold spell has highlighted how inefficient economy 7 is with the house going cold by 4.30 meaning we have to put a heater on by 5pm. the storage heaters are less than a year old and are automatics the house has both loft and cavity wall insulation all checked and refill within the last year as OAPs we are finding economy 7 to be far from economy

15:15: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi James, Economy 10 is a pretty old tariff and these days very few suppliers are offering it to new customers - when I checked a while ago only elf and eon were offering it - and neither them seem to have any info on their websites. You could call them up to see whether they're still offering it?
As for Economy 7 - you can check whether you are on the cheapest E7 deal using the Which? Switch calculator here www.which.co.uk/switch

15:18: [Comment From Richard] Start again! I am with Southern electric who also look after the electrical infrastructure where I live. If I change to another supplier, am I likely to get poorer service from Southern Electric in repairing some of the not infrequent power failures in the vicinity?

15:18: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Hi Richard - no it shouldn't make any difference - they have to run the networks and service separately.

15:19: [Comment From Ron] Without giving any warning or notice BG have increased our tariff twice in the last two years. [now almost double the original price]. Cannot find anyone there prepared to hold constructive discussion despite escalation at my insistence. What further options are open to obtain redress?

15:19: Fiona Cochrane - Which?: Hi Ron, We don't agree with energy suppliers being able to increase your rates without telling you in advance and we've just about won the battle- Of gem, the regulator, is currently consulting on the changes to stop them doing this. However to your specific problem, there is an Energy Ombudsman who can look at your case once one of two things have happened- either it's been 8 weeks since your original complaint or BG issue a deadlock letter setting out that you can't reach agreement. In terms of your next steps I would suggest that you go back to BG initially and attempt to escalate it again or go straight to the complaints division, then once you meet the criteria you can go to the Ombudsman.

15:20: [Comment From norman] I have an old Honeywell Thermostat in the Hall set @21degrees It takes heat readings from a radiator in the hall no TRV fitted on rad .The Thermostat switches of the Gas Central Heating heat system when the hall heats up but does not switch the system on when the hall temp falls Any ideas why

15:20: Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Sorry Norman - this sounds like a question for a heating/boiler engineer! You can find a recommended one on Which? Local <http://local.which.co.uk/> sorry I can't be more help!

15:21: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Time is ticking away, and we'll be wrapping up shortly...

15:25: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Remember you can keep updated with all the latest energy news, reviews and advice by visiting the Environment and Saving Energy section of Which.co.uk - take a look if you haven't already!
<http://www.which.co.uk/environment-and-saving-energy/>

15:26: [Comment From Graham]

Can you just explain the difference between 'Capped' and 'Fixed Rate' tariffs, please? I see that my current (Scottish Power Fixed Price Energy to March 2011 Online - NSC Fixed Monthly Direct Debit) is classed as 'Capped' on 'Switch with Which? I always thought it was a fixed rate tariff, where the price per KWH remained fixed! Appreciate monthly payments might change according to actual amount used.

15:26: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Hi Graham, the difference between 'Capped' and 'Fixed rate tariffs is that fixed rates will not change throughout your contracted period on the tariff. Fixed rates are completely static. However, capped rates have a limit, or cap, that the rates will never go above. If energy rates decrease the capped rate tariffs will decrease with them but if they increase the capped rates will not. This makes capped rates a much more secure option from a customer perspective, although you are likely to pay a premium to be on a capped rate tariff. I hope this helps.

15:29: Kelly Fenn - Which?: That's it for our Q&A I'm afraid everybody - the past three hours have flown by thanks to your comments and questions!

Hope you've enjoyed following the event. You can come back to this page later to replay the event in full - and we'll also be posting a PDF transcript here shortly of all of today's Q&As so you can print off all the Q&As.

15:30: Kelly Fenn - Which?: And if this Q&A has just got you warmed up, you can get involved in lots of energy-related debates over at Which? Conversation - <http://conversation.which.co.uk/category/energy-home/> .

Latest topics include solar panels and ground source heat pumps, the price of e-saving light bulbs, and why no-one seems to trust energy providers these days...

15:30: [Comment From Graham] Thanks Tom....still puzzled why my current tariff is shown as 'Capped' when I'm sure it's 'Fixed' on your site. Still, no great shakes, as it ends next month :-) Thanks to all you guys at 'Which?' for a very informative and useful 'Q&A'. Look forward to the next one. Cheers, Graham.

15:32 Hazel Cottrell - Which?: Thanks for all your questions - it's been an interesting afternoon.

15:32 Sylvia: Thank you everyone for your very interesting questions! Keep looking at our website for further information.

All the best, Sylvia

15:32: Tom Yeomans-Which? Switch: Thank you everyone for your questions, Graham I will look into your query as soon as I am back at my desk. Glad we could be of assistance. Tom

15:33

15:33: Kelly Fenn - Which?: Great - a final thanks from me to everyone who joined us. For more live events on Which.co.uk check out <http://www.which.co.uk/live>.

Goodbye!

[END OF WHICH? LIVE EVENT]