

Dominic Prince *meets the woman behind My Consortium, a co-operative that has turned the tricky business of buying fuel for Agas, boilers and tractors into an efficient money-saving process*

IF THE DREAD OF ordering heating oil every six months at an ever-expanding price is something that irks you then salvation may be at hand. The era of ordering and purchasing heating oil, diesel, perhaps coal gas and wood too, en masse and online is with us. All it needs is for everyone to join up and anything is possible. Prices will tumble and service will improve; at least that is how one enterprising Leicestershire lady sees it.

Last September 42-year-old Lisa Poole from Sproxton in Leicestershire set herself up as an agent for a group of like-minded individuals who wanted to cut the cost of buying domestic fuel oil by buying it in bulk. It's a co-operative where everyone shares the discounts and the benefits, and it appears to be catching on.

The idea is simple. In fact so simple that it is a wonder no one has done it before. My Consortium, Poole's fledgling venture, is a buying group of like-minded individuals who have pooled together (pun very much intended) in order to benefit from the lower prices offered when buying in bulk. So, rather than ordering individually, a collective of people get together, generally county by county, and order en masse. Ordering oil in this way means the price comes down by between 10 and 15 per cent. Poole now has four suppliers who collect direct from the refinery and distribute the oil ordered among her growing band of clients.

She originally started buying oil, both for heating houses and diesel for cars, for 12 customers in Sproxton and she is now buying for 300 people in Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Rutland and has further designs on Dorset, where she was brought up, and Berkshire where she also has customers. Ideally, she'd like to see the scheme go nationwide. It might yet. Lisa Poole has had expressions of interest from far and wide; it seems everyone with an Aga, a boiler or a tractor is queueing at her door and she reckons that, by the time of My Consortium's first anniversary this month, she'll have more than 500 active accounts.

You can order online or by telephone and there is also a helpline. So, for instance, if a supplier is late with a delivery or there is an emergency need for oil (as there was during the freeze this year) she'll do her best to sort it out for you.

'The business is evolving at the moment but I'm very pleased at the way it is going; it seems to have hit a nerve with all sorts of people,' says Poole. She brokers the deal between the local oil supplier and the customer and no one gets cut out. The oil supplier is pleased with a big order, her customers are delighted at the discount and she benefits from the two per cent commission she is paid by the supplier for arranging the purchase and deliveries.

And it's not just about saving money. Poole calculates how much oil each customer is likely to use during the year and then sends email reminders to them at timely intervals, soliciting orders so she can buy in bulk. My Consortium has an advantage over village co-operatives that operate in much the same way in



Lisa Poole

that village schemes tend to order only when people have run out of oil and need it immediately, but with My Consortium you can order as and when you want to and discounts still apply.

'The suppliers I deal with are very decent, ethical people and I think the customers appreciate the service, too. You get a voice at the end of the phone and so far all the deliveries have been on time,' she says. If the delivery is going to be late, the supplier will ring the client direct and let them know.

Payment is arranged direct with the oil supplier but for the first delivery, payment is required up-front. On subsequent orders payment is either made on the day by a debit card or invoiced by the oil supplier. It sounds complicated but it's not really,

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because Poole will also set up the account for you with the local oil supplier, and deal with deliveries and any problems that occur when ordering. But, be warned: there is a minimum order of 500 litres and although VAT is five per cent up to 2,300 litres, the VAT element then shifts up to 17.5 per cent. Despite this, Lisa Poole is so pleased with the way the business is going that she has joined forces with a utility company that works on the same principle – bulk buying – and she is now able to save money on household utility bills, gas, electricity, home phone, broadband and mobile phone. In fact, anything that the community needs and wants at a discount. Look out Tesco! ◆

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