

# Number of elderly winter deaths soar

## Figure set to increase again this year as pensioners are faced with higher fuel bills

Lauren Thompson

Thousands of elderly people died last winter because they could not afford to heat their home, age charities said today.

The number of excess winter deaths in England and Wales increased by 7 per cent between December 2007 and March 2008, compared with the same period the year before.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics show 25,300 more individuals died during the winter months than at other times of the year, up from 23,740 in the previous period. The vast majority of these, 23,200, were aged over 65.

Joe Harris of the National Pensioner's Convention said: "Since 1997, we have lost over 260,000 pensioners during the winter months because of cold related illnesses, yet the government seems incapable of acting. Pensioners faced with rising fuel bills are constantly worried about whether or not they can afford to put their heating on."

The UK has the highest number of excess winter deaths in Europe – higher than countries with more severe winters such as Finland, Denmark and Austria, according to the World Health Organisation.

Gordon Lishman of Age Concern, the charity, said: "Our number of excess winter deaths is a national scandal. With this winter set to be colder than last, and with pensioners facing a 42 per cent increase in the cost of fuel this year, the numbers will almost certainly rise again this winter."

One in three pensioner households, that is 2.75 million, live in fuel poverty – where one tenth or more of a household's income goes on fuel bills. Age Concern says that two-thirds of pensioners have cut back on the amount of gas and electricity they use since the cost of bills rocketed earlier this year.

All pensioner households currently receive a winter fuel allowance, paid around this time of year, of £250 – or £400 if a resident is aged over 80. In Monday's Pre-Budget Report, Chancellor Alistair Darling announced that pensioners would also get a one-off payment of £60 in January.

Mr. Darling also pledged an extra £100 million funding for Warm Front, the Government's flagship fuel poverty scheme, which offers the most vulnerable households up to £2,700 for energy-efficiency measures such as double glazing, a new boiler or insulation.

But campaigners say that more needs to be done to protect the most vulnerable older people from cold-related illnesses and death this winter.

Mervyn Kohler of Help the Aged, says: "We need more crisis payments for older people struggling to heat their homes this Christmas. When billions have been spent to save our financial institutions surely some can be spared to save our older people."

Mr. Harris of the NPC agreed: "The Government must give pensioners confidence that they will be able to pay their bills by raising the winter fuel allowance to at least £500 for every household. It should also introduce an industry-wide reduced social tariff for older customers and force the energy companies to pass on reductions in wholesale prices to their customers."