



Time to cut duty on fuel

THE sums don't add up.

We're a region with more unemployment, more deprivation, more poverty than almost anywhere else in the country.

Yet we're paying way above the average for fuel.

The Sunday Sun's latest petrol survey reveals the pumps in the North are comfortably priced above the UK average.

We reveal how the highest petrol price ever in the region has now been recorded in Hexham, Northumberland, at a staggering 148.99p per litre.

The highest unleaded price in Hexham falls just a penny short of the highest recorded national price.

If you're in doubt about how much it impacts on people's lives, listen to mum-of-two Joanne Farrier, who co-owns a driving school with her husband.

She says: "In the space of six years, I've gone from paying 98p a litre for fuel to £1.40. That has a massive impact on outgoings both for our business and our family."

They're pretty stunning figures.

And so you can see why campaigners say it's no longer a case of the Government not being able to afford to cut fuel duty, now it's a case that the Government can't afford NOT to cut fuel duty.

In the same way many believe that the Tories need to kickstart new building projects to boost the economy, the Sunday Sun is backing calls to take decisive action in the Budget to cut fuel duty. It will generate growth and jobs.

With many parts of the North recording a rise of at least 2p per litre, experts warn there's another 2p increase coming through the system.

Curbing fuel tax will give more disposable income, lessen the pressure on businesses and free up cash to be spent to help boost the wider economy.

It makes sense.

George Osborne has shown of late that he needs a bit of persuading before he sees sense.

If we keep on telling him, he might have to listen.

CONTACTS

EDITOR: Matt McKenzie 0191 201 6299

matt.mckenzie@ncjmedia.co.uk

NEWSDESK: 0191 201 6331

FEATURES: 0191 201 6132

Mr JUSTICE: 0191 201 6202

PICTURE DESK: 0191 201 6125

SPORTS DESK: 0191 201 6203

CIRCULATION: 0191 2067400

ADVERTISING: 0191 201 6296

PROMOTIONS: 0191 201 6065

SUBSCRIPTIONS: 0191 201 6491

PHOTOSALES: 0191 201 6001

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MOTIVATED:
Sarah Pittendrigh has turned her life around after bankruptcy

Hammering at the glass ceiling

I HAVE an HGV licence, I own and run my own business, but first and foremost I'm a mum, wife and daughter. I see myself as equal to all the men I have worked with. The only way I cannot compete is brute strength, but then I would hope to outwit them!

Being a mum is my greatest achievement. After that it would be starting Simply Bows and Chair Covers from scratch as a single mum on income support and then winning Most Promising UK Business in the British Chamber of Commerce Business Awards after four years trading, and picking up Best Small Business at the North East Woman Entrepreneur of the Year Awards last year.

I am very lucky to have it all, but I have an exceptional support network. My parents live opposite and my husband Stewart is a self-employed farmer, so we all do our bit to muck in.

It hasn't always been plain sailing for me though. In 2008 a company I used to work for went under when the recession hit. Literally overnight sales dwindled to virtually nothing as the corporate clients just weren't there. I went from someone with a great career to a bankrupt single mum with nothing.

However, within three months I was back on my feet after starting my business, and my aim now is to have

SARAH PITTENDRIGH is managing director of Simply Bows and Chair Covers, which specialises in chair covers, linen and accessories for weddings, balls and corporate events. The 41-year-old, from Unthank in Northumberland, went from bankruptcy to running an award-winning franchise business in just two years. She'll be hosting a live blog on International Women's Day and wants women from across the North East to share their experiences

30 franchises across the UK by next year.

Like many entrepreneurs who are mums, my big driver was to ensure my son William, who's now 13, had the kind of future I'd always mapped out for him. It was sheer grit, determination and damned hard work to get out of that mess. I didn't have time for self-pity.

I come from a family of hard workers with an ethos of "winners never quit and quitters never win". My mum was an excellent inspiration for me when I started my company. She supported me from the beginning and gave me the strength to believe in myself.

A big motivator for women in business is carving a career for themselves that gives them that work-life balance.

One of the biggest problems for women is the high cost of childcare

in the UK as not everyone is lucky enough to have family close by like me. I hear many women say they can't afford to go back to work. Women are at the peak of their careers in their late 20s and early 30s - just when they tend to have babies.

If someone was earning £25,000 a year, by the time they pay for their childcare they might end up earning £8,000. They feel they might as well stay at home. I think we need far more government-subsidised childcare. In Denmark the vast majority of women go back to work after having children because families only pay up to 25% of the cost of childcare, with those on low incomes or single parents often paying less.

I do think there's some way to go for women's rights and we still have a glass ceiling in the UK.

We have only two female chief

executives in the FTSE 100 and only 9% of executive director positions in the last year have been women, yet half of non-executive director appointments have been women.

In my experience women are exceptional multi-taskers. I have 12 franchises, all headed up by women with children and young families. They have exceptional entrepreneurial flair, are highly motivated yet are able to run their homes successfully with their strong organisational skills.

I also know lots of female owner-managers and we often hook up to share best practice. Quite a few women in business come to me for mentoring advice and vice versa, as well as making use of the North East's excellent business networks such as the Entrepreneurs Forum and the Chamber of Commerce.

There are plenty of bright, determined and resourceful women out there. It would be a shame if they were denied the chance to fulfil their potential because the system is weighted against them.

● Sarah will be hosting a live blog during International Women's Day on Friday, March 8, from 11am-12noon. Visit the Facebook page of the Entrepreneurs Forum to ask a question.

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