

Cold Weather Payments

I have been alerted that Cold Weather Payments have been triggered in some post codes in the constituency.

Constituency	Wokingham
Trigger period	7/12/2022 to 13/12/2022
Postcode districts affected in your constituency*	RG1, RG2, RG30, RG40, RG41, RG45, RG5, RG6, RG7
Met Office weather station(s) triggered	Odiham

Cold Weather Payments are made to recipients of selected benefits. To trigger the payments, the average temperature at a specified weather station must be recorded as, or forecast to be, 0°C or below for seven consecutive days. The DWP provides further information for claimants here:

<https://www.gov.uk/cold-weather-payment/eligibility>

The alert was **triggered on 7/12/2022** for the period 7/12/2022 to 13/12/2022.

£25 will be paid to eligible residents within Wokingham constituency living in the postcode district(s) listed above.

Compensation for Postal Managers

I have pursued the issue of compensation for Postal Managers who were wrongly accused when the new computer system failed to account properly for their businesses. The letter beneath gives us the latest update on compensation, where I have urged the government to be generous and get these matters settled:

Dear Colleague,

POST OFFICE: COMPENSATION FOR HORIZON SCANDAL

The Post Office Horizon scandal, which began over 20 years ago, has had a devastating impact on the lives of many postmasters. Starting in the late 1990s, the Post Office began installing Horizon accounting software, but faults in the software led to shortfalls in branches' accounts. The Post Office demanded sub-postmasters cover the shortfalls, and in many cases wrongfully prosecuted them between 1999 and 2015 for false accounting or theft.

I am writing to update you on the latest steps that the Government is taking to ensure that swift and fair compensation is made available to postmasters.

Group Litigation Order scheme

The Government wants the postmasters who exposed this scandal through the High Court Group Litigation Order case to receive similar compensation to that available to their peers. In March 2022, the Chancellor announced that further funding would be made available to deliver this compensation. On 2 September my predecessor wrote to all postmasters in the Group Litigation Order group to ask for their views about whether BEIS or the Post Office should deliver the scheme, and whether it should be organised along the lines of the Historical Shortfall Scheme or based on Alternative Dispute Resolution. In short there was very strong support for an Alternative Dispute Resolution scheme, to be delivered by BEIS. This is the route that we will follow.

The informal consultation also requested views on other issues related to the scheme. Unsurprisingly, there was considerable concern among postmasters that the scheme should be subject to properly independent input. In the light of this, we have decided to create an independent advisory Board chaired by Professor Chris Hodges, an expert in alternative dispute resolution. The membership of that Board will include Lord Arbuthnot and Rt Hon Kevan Jones MP who are recognised by colleagues across Parliament for many years of outstanding campaigning for the wronged postmasters. The advisory Board will be supported by a BEIS secretariat.

Since the consultation closed, a great deal of work has been done to develop the details of scheme, drawing on the detailed comments made in response to the consultation. I am today writing to members of the Group Litigation Order with further information about how the scheme will work.

We are now asking claimants to prepare preliminary information about their claims. In parallel, we are working to engage Alternative Dispute Resolution specialists and lawyers to deliver it. Those experts should be on board in early Spring, and at that point full claims will be submitted. I hope that compensation will start to flow before the summer, and that most cases can be resolved before the end of 2023.

We have already announced that we will meet postmasters' reasonable legal costs in claiming under the scheme. To enable lawyers to work on preparing claims, we are today announcing details of the costs tariff for the early phases of the scheme, which have been set by independent costs draftsmen. We will shortly be inviting claimants' lawyers to make proposals for the expert evidence which they will need. I am also pleased to say that the compensation payments will be disregarded for benefits purposes (once secondary legislation is in place).

I have placed on <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/compensation-scheme-for-group-litigation-order-case-postmasters> a copy of my letter to Group Litigation Order postmasters and a number of supporting documents.

Overtured Historical Convictions

I am also pleased to provide an update on Post Office's progress in delivering compensation to those with overtured historical convictions.

Lord Dyson considered the awards available for non-pecuniary damages, which are personal damages such as mental distress and loss of liberty, in an Early Neutral Evaluation process earlier this year. Since then, the Government has supported Post Office's approach to deliver compensation more swiftly by settling non-pecuniary claims first using the framework established by Lord Dyson. As of 1 December, 51 claims for non-pecuniary damages have been received and 37 offers made, worth £4.7m in addition to interim payments already paid.

Regarding pecuniary damages, which are financial damages such as loss of earnings, only 8 claims have been received to date, 2 of which have been settled in full and final settlement alongside their non-pecuniary damages. Government continues to encourage Post Office to process these claims as fast as possible.

As of 1 December, 82 claims for interim compensation have been received and 77 payments made, worth £7.7m. Post Office has also identified potential cases of hardship and offered and paid further hardship payments of £100,000 to 3 postmasters. Furthermore, following the recent statutory tax exemption and Early Neutral Evaluation, Post Office decided to increase the upper limit of interim payments for all future applicants to £163,000 (from the original level of £100,000). For those claimants who received the original interim payment amount of up to £100,000, the Post Office had focussed on progressing and settling their non-pecuniary claims. However, where claimants who had received the original interim payment amount of up to £100,000 and were not able to submit a non-pecuniary claim by early December and so it is unlikely that their non-pecuniary claim would be settled by the end of the year, Post Office has offered top-up payments of £63,000.

Historical Shortfall Scheme

I am also pleased to see the progress that Post Office has made in delivering compensation to postmasters through the Historical Shortfall Scheme. As of 30 November, 93% of eligible claimants have been issued offers of compensation, totalling £70.8m.

The cases that remain are some of the most complex and the Post Office is working to process these claims as soon as possible. However, the Government recognises the fact that those claimants who are yet to receive offers or payments may have been waiting for a considerable period of time for their cases to be settled. For these reasons, the Government is pleased that the Post Office will introduce interim payments for those who have yet to receive an offer or who have chosen to dispute their offer. This will be in addition to the existing hardship payments that the Post Office has already been providing to claimants in particularly difficult circumstances.

The Government announced in October that it is providing funding to the Post

Office to enable eligible late applications to be accepted into the Historical Shortfall Scheme. The Post Office is beginning to process the late claims it has received to date, and I would encourage anyone else who thinks they might be eligible to get in touch with Post Office at the earliest opportunity to discuss their claim.

Benefit Disregard

The Government is aware of the impact of the Horizon scandal on affected postmasters, resulting in significant financial hardship, including bankruptcy for some.

Many postmasters have now received compensation payments which would take them over the £16,000 capital limit, rendering them ineligible to receive means-tested benefits and reducing pension credit entitlement. This risks prolonging the impacts of the Horizon scandal on these postmasters by affecting their eligibility to apply for benefits.

We are therefore introducing a benefits disregard for all Post Office and Horizon-related compensation. Once the secondary legislation for this disregard is in place, payments received by postmasters will no longer count towards the capital limit for means-tested benefits and pension credits and will therefore not affect their eligibility to claim for these.

The Government will legislate to put this disregard in place at the earliest possible opportunity.

Yours ever

RT HON GRANT SHAPPS MP

Secretary of State for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy

Gordon Brown takes Labour back to a broken model for the UK

It was Gordon Brown who told us once devolution was granted to Scotland Scottish nationalism would melt away. As some of us feared, instead it gave the SNP a bigger platform and more resentments to work on. They proved masterful at governing badly whilst blaming the constitutional settlement and Whitehall for all their woes. Labour failed to put devolution in during the 1970s, used their big majority to do it after 1997, and later lost countless seats in Scotland as payment for their pains.

Gordon is back again setting Labour policy on this most vexatious of political insider questions. He wants more devolved powers for Scotland. He wishes to ignore England and make the devolution within our Union all the

more lopsided. Just as the EU wiped England of their maps and tried to balkanise England into a set of unloved regions, so Gordon Brown wishes to do the same. He accepts that Labour lost the crucial referendum to set up an elected regional government in the North East and did not try again. So this time he wants to build regions up from so called partnerships between local Councils aggregating to a new region.

There is no strong regional identity in most parts of England. Exeter does not want to be governed from Bristol, Liverpool does not want to be managed by Manchester. Wokingham is variously bundled into the South East, Rest of the South East (x London), Wessex, Thames Valley, Berks, Bucks and Oxon. None of these regional groupings command our loyalty or consent. We would not vote for any of them to have governments.

People in my area belong to Wokingham Borough or to West Berks. We belong to the county of Berkshire in the country of England. We identify with Berkshire and with England without either having a government. Lop sided devolution has gone too far. Ignoring England's views and needs is wrong. Those who say they want power devolved should listen to people's own perceptions of their identities. The best devolution of power is not to new layers of government but to individuals and businesses to make more of our own decisions.

Further discussions with Minister Lucy Frazer about housing targets

I am having further discussions with Minister Lucy Frazer about the Levelling Up Bill and the housing targets.



[Housing numbers for Wokingham](#)

I am pleased to report the government has listened to the arguments I and other MPs put to allow more local decision taking on the crucial issue of how much housing development an area can accept and sustain. They have agreed to drop mandatory top down targets, leaving local Planning authorities including Wokingham Borough free to make decisions about how much housing to include in a proper effective local plan. The government will issue guidance of how much housing they think is needed, but accept that this may need modifying in the light of local circumstances, local opinion and environmental issues. They have also proposed ending the five year supply of land requirement where there is an up to date plan in place, and propose ways to encourage the build out of existing permissions instead of seeking more.

Below is the position as set out by the Secretary of State in a recent letter to me

THE LEVELLING UP AND REGENERATION BILL: PLANNING AND LOCAL CONTROL IN ENGLAND

Since returning to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities, I have listened

to the powerful representations made by colleagues about the ways the current planning system is not working and must be improved. I recognise that at the heart of concerns is a principled desire to make the system work better for our local communities and constituents. I fully agree and share this goal.

Whatever we do at a national level, politics is always local and there is no area that demonstrates this more than planning. Through reforms made by Conservative-led governments since 2010, we have a locally-led planning system – for instance, by scrapping policies like top-down regional targets that built nothing but resentment – and introducing neighbourhood planning.

COMMUNITY CONTROL

Too often I hear from communities that they are not getting a proper say in protecting the landscapes and natural environment they cherish, nor can they build the homes they want, in the places that are most suitable, with the right access to public services. To address these concerns, including those raised by members signing amendments NC21 and NC24 relating to housing targets, 5-year land supply, and the presumption in favour of sustainable development, I will consult on the following.

First, while I will retain a method for calculating local housing need figures, I will consult on changes. I recognise that there is no truly 'objective' way of calculating how many homes are needed in an area, but I do believe that the plan-making process for housing has to start with a number. This number should, however, be an advisory starting point, a guide that is not mandatory. It will be up to local authorities, working with their communities, to determine how many homes can actually be built, taking into account what should be protected in each area – be that our precious Green Belt or national parks, the character or an area, or heritage assets. It will also be up to them to increase the proportion of affordable housing if they wish.

My changes will instruct the Planning Inspectorate that they should no longer override sensible local decision making, which is sensitive to and reflects local constraints and concerns. Overall this amounts to a rebalancing of the relationship between local councils and the Planning Inspectorate, and will give local communities a greater say in what is built

in their

neighbourhood. For example, when assessing a local plan, the following will have to be taken into account:

- Genuine constraints: local planning authorities will be able to plan for fewer houses if building is constrained by important factors such as national parks, heritage restrictions, and areas of high flood risk.
- Green Belt: further clarifying our approach to date in the National Planning Policy Framework and the Localism Act, we will be clear that local planning authorities are not expected to review the Green Belt to deliver housing. This is in line with commitments made by the Prime Minister in the Summer.
- Character: local authorities will not be expected to build developments at densities that would be wholly out of character with existing areas or which would lead to a significant change of character, for example, new blocks of high-rise flats which are entirely inappropriate in a low-rise neighbourhood. While more homes are needed in many existing urban areas, we must pursue 'gentle densities' as championed by the Building Better,

As the Prime Minister committed in the Summer, I will also review how the 'soundness' test for reviewing plans at examination is operated by the Planning Inspectorate. I will ensure that plans no longer have to be 'justified', meaning that there will be a lower bar for assessment, and authorities will no longer have to provide disproportionate amounts of evidence to argue their case.

The effect of these changes will be to make absolutely clear that Local Housing Need should always be a starting point – but no more than that – and importantly, that areas will not be expected to meet this need where they are subject to genuine constraints.

Inspectors will therefore be required to take a more reasonable approach to authorities that have come forward with plans that take account of the concerns of the local community, by taking a more pragmatic approach at examination which fully reflects this updated policy.

LOCAL PLANS

I want to change the system on the rolling five-year land supply. We will end the obligation on

local authorities to maintain a rolling five-year supply of land for housing where their plans are up-to-date. Therefore for authorities with a local plan, or where authorities are benefitting from transitional arrangements, the presumption in favour of sustainable development and the 'tilted balance' will typically not apply in relation to issues affecting land supply. I also want to consult on dropping the requirement for a 20% buffer to be added for both plan making and decision making – which otherwise effectively means that local authorities need to identify six years of supply rather than five. In addition, I want to recognise that some areas have historically overdelivered on housing – but they are not rewarded for this. My plan will therefore allow local planning authorities to take this into account when preparing a new local plan, lowering the number of houses they need to plan for. Places with existing plans will benefit from the changes above, as they will be free of five-year land supply obligations provided that plan is up to date. Communities will therefore have a much more powerful incentive to get involved in drawing up local plans. Only four-in-ten local authorities have up to date local plans and I am determined to change this. They can protect the important landscapes they cherish, direct homes to the places they want, and adopt design codes to secure the houses they want to see. Once a plan is in place, these changes mean that they will no longer be exposed to speculative developments on which they have less of a say. To give further assurance to colleagues who have signed amendment NC27 on community appeals, I will increase community protections afforded by a neighbourhood plan against developer appeals – increasing those protections from two years to five years. The power of local and neighbourhood plans will be enhanced by the Bill; and this will be underpinned further through this commitment. Adopting a plan will be the best form of community action – and protection.

BUILD OUT

I strongly agree with the intent of amendments NC 28, 29, and 30 that seek to ensure developers build out the developments for which they already have planning permission. We need to hold developers to account so that desperately needed new homes are built, and I already have a

significant package of measures in the Bill to do this, including public reporting and declining new planning applications on a site if developers are failing to build out. I will consult on two further measures:

- i) on allowing local planning authorities to refuse planning applications from developers who have built slowly in the past; and
- ii) on making sure that local authorities who permission land are not punished under the housing delivery test when it is developers who are not building.

1