

The government's approach to making working more worthwhile for families

I have been sent a reminder of changes coming in this April. We want to support people in work, as well as ensure the welfare system works as a safety net for those who need it.

The measures include:

- A further increase in the Personal Allowance to £11,500; an increase of over 70% since 2010. Since the start of this Parliament we have cut income tax for 31m people and taken 1.3m of the lowest paid out of income tax altogether.
- Increasing support for low earners by raising the National Living Wage to £7.50.
- Helping working parents with childcare costs by launching Tax Free Childcare from 28 April – saving working parents up to £2000 per year for each child under the age of 12.
- Increasing income for 3 million households by reducing the Universal Credit taper rate from 65 per cent to 63 per cent.
- Investing £330m in practical employment support to help disabled people back into work.
- Helping savers with the launch of a new NS&I bond offering a market-leading interest rate of 2.2% and increasing the annual ISA limit to £20,000.

School money and class sizes

All UK parties have been keen to get class sizes down in state schools. Yesterday Labour decided to make an issue of this, forgetting that class sizes have risen quite a lot in Wales where they are in government. I was interested to hear one of their spokesmen defend this by pointing out satisfaction with schools in Wales had gone up at the same time as class sizes. He was then at a loss to answer the obvious sequel – if parents and pupils think things are getting better, why did class size worry him?

I am all in favour of decent funding for schools, and have been asking for more money for Wokingham and West Berkshire schools where budgets are tight. I have been asking both for more in total to schools, and more as a proportion of the budget to areas like Wokingham that have traditionally been

given much less than the best funded. I would, however, be interested in your thoughts on class size.

It seems to me there are obvious occasions when individual pupils need individual help. That requires a good staffing ratio., There are also occasions when a good teacher or outside speaker or lecturer has something interesting and important to say when you can open the lesson or lecture up to many more pupils, as many more can benefit from it. Class size is an average figure which can conceal as well as reveal. Some star teachers and star lessons are so good that they are recorded and used in a wide range of ways by many students. On line learning is both one to one and one to many.

The best judge of how many teachers a school needs should be the School Board and management team led by the Head. There need to be sufficient teachers for those things that need teaching in small groups or require individual attention. There can also be other times of day and topics that can be covered in larger groups. In practice schools experiment with smaller and larger groups depending on subject and age range of pupils, and often have more than one adult in the classroom so individual pupils can have individual attention as well as more general group or whole class work proceeding. The number of teachers in a secondary school is also affected by how many subject options the school wishes to offer. The number of subjects varies considerably between schools.

Proposed closure of Marks and Spencer in Wokingham

I have been notified of a plan for the possible closure the Wokingham store, following consultation with staff who will be offered jobs in neighbouring stores.

I have written back to Marks and Spencer asking why they think they need to close the store, and why they are pessimistic about its future turnover and profitability. I asked if they have found the best mix between food, household and textile products. They need to examine their merchandising and marketing strategy for what should be a successful and profitable store. They also need to take into account the growth of Wokingham and the surrounding area as new housing goes in.

I will let you know what response I receive.

Probate fees

I lobbied the government against the proposed increase in probate fees. I was pleased to learn yesterday that they are not proceeding with this increase in the present Parliament. I hope they do not reappear in the Manifesto.

Buying things from the EU

We are still waiting to learn if the rest of the EU wants to impose tariffs on all their many agricultural exports to us, and on the cars they send us. Most of the things we export to them are tariff free under WTO rules or would be subject to very low tariffs. All services are tariff free, the things like aerospace parts and planes are tariff free. The EU sell us so much more of the limited number of items that do attract serious tariffs under WTO schedules.

I would like to reassure people who are worried about this. If by any chance the rest of the EU does turn down our offer of tariff free trade in an unlikely fit of self harm, we can find plenty of cheaper and better substitutes.

You do not have to buy German or French cars. There is now a good choice of models, prices and specifications available from a range of UK car factories. If the EU wants tariffs on cars I would recommend the factory owners increase their UK capacity, as we will be wanting more home produced vehicles.

A visit to one of England's vineyards taught me that England makes some good white wines. There are plenty of good Australian and Californian reds as well as English.

There are many great English cheese, so you don't need to buy French. There is such an abundance of choice. Our dairy industry was held back and made smaller by EU policy, with a long period of restrictive quotas. It needs more domestic demand for higher value added products.

Our supermarkets do rely on a lot of continental fresh produce, but there are other possible sources at home and abroad outside the EU which would be more attractive if they go for the EU tariff option. The UK could remove tariffs on rest of the world food where they produce things we cannot produce here which would bring those prices down.

In a world of oversupply, with low rates of world inflation, being the customer has its advantages. All the time we remain in the EU we have to impose high tariff barriers on food from the rest of the world. Out of the EU we can cut or remove tariffs, and can bargain for a better deal for our

exporters at the same time. The EU would be silly to make it dearer and more difficult for us to buy their products, when there is plenty of choice elsewhere.