

Meeting with Minister on new SEND schools

I met with the Minister to welcome the decision to go ahead with two new SEND schools in Wokingham Borough including one in my constituency. Extra provision is needed to give parents and pupils choice where they need special support in education.

I also explained to the Minister that there is a disagreement locally about the site for one of the schools. Rook's Nest is an important green gap between settlements. The site of the old Farley Primary School is a site that has been developed before. Building at Farley would be less contentious, could draw on developer money and could be expedited. The Minister said Wokingham Council seemed to favour Rook's Nest and they would have big role in determining the detail of the project. The government would be happy with a suitable project at the Farley site.

Over to the Council.

Exercising Brexit freedoms?

Successive Prime Ministers have not used a lot of Brexit talent on the backbenches.

I raise this now because the current administration is becoming more Remain establishment with each reshuffle. The new Justice Secretary and new Deputy PM are both from the Remain stable. The Attorney General and the Chancellor of the Exchequer are also.

Today the test of Brexit resolve surrounds the EU Retained law Bill. The Prime Minister has always shown good support for this measure. It passed the Commons easily with a majority of 71. It is now stuck in the Lords where there are said to be many critics. If that is so they should be asked to complete their consideration and amendment of the Bill so the Commons can reaffirm its support and get it through, with or without use of the Parliament Act.

The Bill proposes keeping all those EU laws which are valued, where Ministers should bring forward confirmatory Parliamentary action to cement their passage into direct UK law. It allows the EU laws to cease to have effect where they are not wanted. Some say this is too big a job for the civil service. I say they know these laws as they were usually very keen to get them adopted. Department by Department they can help Ministers winnow out those laws that UK Ministers opposed at the time of their introduction or

thought were unhelpful, and those laws which have been found to be unhelpful since.

Continued support for non-domestic energy customers

I have received the letter below from the Government regarding continued support for non-domestic energy customers.

The Energy Bills Discount Scheme provides a continuation of support to non-domestic customers, with support backdated to the start of April. It will provide all eligible businesses and other non-domestic energy customers with a discount on high gas and electricity bills until 31 March 2024. It will also provide businesses in energy and trade intensive industry sectors with a higher level of support as they are less able to pass these higher costs on to customers due to international competition.

Dear Colleagues,

RE: Continued Support for Non-domestic Energy Customers

I am writing to you about the Regulations that deliver the Energy Bills Discount Scheme. The Regulations were laid in Parliament on 25 April 2023 and come into force on 26 April.

I am delighted to announce that, following the Energy Bill Relief Scheme ending on 31 March, the Energy Bills Discount Scheme provides a continuation of support to non-domestic customers, with support backdated to the start of April. The Government provided an unprecedented package of support for non-domestic customers through the winter in the shape of the Energy Bill Relief Scheme, with total support of £7.3bn expected to be provided under this scheme, shielding businesses and saving some around half of their wholesale energy cost. The Government has taken difficult but right and considered decisions when necessary, following an unprecedented rise in energy prices, to support our essential UK businesses and public sector services.

Wholesale energy prices have fallen significantly since the introduction of the Energy Bill Relief Scheme. The Energy Bills Discount Scheme reflects this change and makes adjustments to the support provided under the Energy Bill Relief Scheme. The Energy Bills Discount Scheme strikes a balance between supporting businesses between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024 and limiting taxpayers' exposure to volatile energy markets.

The scheme provides long term certainty for businesses and reflects how the scale of the challenge has changed since September last year. This will help businesses locked into contracts signed before recent substantial falls in

the wholesale price of energy manage their costs and provide others with reassurance against the risk of prices rising again. This is a serious intervention in order to protect the public and the economy from significant increases in energy bills.

The Energy Bills Discount Scheme will provide all eligible businesses and other non-domestic energy customers with a discount on high gas and electricity bills until 31 March 2024. It will also provide businesses in energy and trade intensive industry) sectors with a higher level of support as they are less able to pass these higher costs on to customers due to international competition. The Energy Bills Discount Scheme price reduction will be linked to the wholesale element of a non-domestic customer's gas and electricity bill and Government will reimburse suppliers in accordance with the scheme.

Further support will be available to domestic end users on heat networks, who fall under the Energy Bills Discount Scheme due to heat network operators having commercial energy contracts, to ensure they do not face disproportionately higher energy bills than consumers in equivalent households who benefit from the Energy Price Guarantee. Heat suppliers will be required to apply for this support and then pass on any discounts to their customers in a 'just and reasonable' way.

Eligibility for support under the Energy Bill Relief Scheme and the Energy Bills Discount Scheme will also be extended to additional non-standard cases not previously eligible. This includes where: non-domestic customers have received gas or electricity from license-exempt suppliers via private wire (localised electricity grids connected to local distribution networks but linked to a privately-owned central plant which produces electricity) or pipe (where gas is conveyed to the customer's premises by pipe) and where prices paid are pegged to wholesale energy prices.

The Energy Bills Discount Scheme Regulations will ensure that essential energy bill support is provided to businesses in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, that are supplied both by licensed gas and electricity suppliers and license-exempt suppliers. They will also ensure that any non-domestic business or individual that receives energy through an intermediary will also benefit from the Energy Bills Discount Scheme in a 'just and reasonable' way.

Further information on the Energy Bills Discount Scheme including legislation, rules and guidance can be found on our Energy Bills Discount Scheme page.

Amanda Solloway MP
Minister for Energy Consumers & Affordability

My Intervention on the Sudan Ministerial Statement

I was one of the MPs who pressed Ministers to take more urgent action to get UK nationals out of Sudan where they wished to leave. I am glad they are now running some flights. The FCO needs to do all it can to contact and support UK people who are in Sudan against their wishes. They deserve our full attention and help.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):

The Government advise nationals in difficulties to stay indoors, but what if they run out of food, what if there is no power, water or other utilities, or what if there is fire in the local area? What is the advice and message of hope for them then?

Mr Andrew Mitchell, Minister of State for Development and Africa:

My right hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. The only advice that we can give through the Foreign Office—the only advice—is to stay indoors, because of all the reasons that I have given during the statement about the jeopardy on the streets outside. We have changed the advice today to say that although we think that people should undoubtedly remain indoors if they can, if they do not, it is at their own risk. But they must make their decisions on the ground. Of course, there are those who know the situation around where they live extremely well and may well be able to exercise their judgment, but they do so at their own risk.

My Intervention on the Opposition Day Debate on Cost of Living Increases

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):

Will the Minister confirm the IMF figures that in 2020 to 2022—that important three-year period after we left the EU—the UK was the fastest growing economy of the G7? The Opposition's forecast that the UK might be a poorer performer this year is just a forecast, and most forecasts are usually wrong.

John Glen, Chief Secretary to the Treasury:

As always, my right hon. Friend is on the money. The point is that forecasts predict many different things. I have been in the Treasury for nearly five years; forecasts for every fiscal event rarely prove to be true at the next fiscal event.

We must continue to focus on taking the right decisions, decision by

decision, and prove those forecasters wrong. That means long-term, sustainable and healthy growth that pays for our NHS and schools, finds jobs for young people and provides a safety net for older people, all while making our country one of the most prosperous in the world. It also means reducing debt, which we are on track to do. In fact, because of the decisions we have taken and the improved outlook for the public finances, underlying debt in five years' time is now forecast to be nearly three percentage points lower than back in the autumn. That means more money for our public services and a lower burden on future generations—deeply held Conservative values, which we put into practice today. It is these steps that will make our country and our people better off. We are also taking action to shelter the most vulnerable while we achieve these longer-term ambitions for the economy.

In the Budget, we announced that the energy price guarantee would remain at £2,500 per year until July 2023. That was funded in part by the energy profits levy that this Government introduced last year, recognising that profit levels in the sector had increased significantly due to very high oil and gas prices caused by global circumstances, including of course Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The levy is expected to raise just under £26 billion between 2022-23 and 2027-28, on top of around £25 billion in tax receipts from the sector in the same period through the permanent tax regime. The energy price guarantee measure will save the average family a further £160 on top of the energy support measures already announced, bringing total Government support for energy bills to £1,500 for the typical household since October 2022.

It is worth recapping those measures. This Government have helped all domestic electricity customers with £400 off their energy bills through the energy bills support scheme. The energy bills support scheme alternative funding provides £400 to around 900,000 households that are not supplied by domestic electricity contracts and are unable to receive support automatically through the energy bills support scheme.

Our support has not stopped there. Alongside holding down energy bills, freezing fuel duty and increasing universal credit, we are giving up to £900 in cost of living payments to households on means-tested benefits. Starting from today, over 8 million families across the UK will receive the first £301 cost of living payment from the Government. That is the first of up to three payments for those on means-tested benefits, totalling £900 through 2023-24. Those entitled do not need to apply for the payment or do anything to receive it. The payments will be accompanied by a payment of £150 for people on eligible disability benefits this summer and a payment of £300 on top of winter fuel payments for pensioners at the end of 2023.

These are carefully designed interventions, targeted at the most vulnerable across communities in the United Kingdom. The latest payment follows on from the £650 cost of living payment delivered to households on means-tested benefits by the Government in 2022, with an additional £150 for individuals on disability benefits and £300 for pensioner households.

The Government of course need to recognise that some people will fall into difficulties. They have enabled local authorities to provide additional

support with the cost of household essentials through a 12-month extension to the household support fund in England worth £1 billion, including Barnett funding. We are also ensuring that more than 10 million working-age families will see an increase in their benefit payments from April 2023, based on the September inflation figure of 10.1%.

While we shelter the most vulnerable, the public also rightly expect us to look further to the future, making sure we are taking steps to grow sustainably and securely in the long term. This Government are unashamedly pro-growth, because expanding the productive capacity of the economy is the only way to solve the productivity puzzle, which has dogged us for decades, and improve living standards for all.

One reason we are held back is because a great number of people have left the labour market altogether. As a Conservative, I believe there is virtue in work and getting people into work is the best way to avoid the ills and perils of poverty. There has been an increase of more than 1.5 million working households since 2010, which shows that we are on the side of working families. That includes our new game-changing childcare offer that will entitle working parents in England to 30 hours of free childcare per week, once their child is nine months old, and close the gap between parental leave ending and the current childcare offer.

In addition to making provision on free childcare, the Budget set out to remove barriers for the long-term sick and disabled, for jobseekers and for older people with our pension tax reforms. Part of the plan is welfare reform to support those who have been disengaged from the labour market. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has introduced a White Paper setting out reforms that will support more people who are long-term sick or disabled to try work without any fear of losing their benefits. Other policies that we announced at the Budget will then ensure that those individuals are better supported to stay and succeed in work. Overall, the Office for Budget Responsibility expects the spring Budget package to result in 110,000 more individuals in the labour market by the end of the forecast period.

The UK saw the fastest growth in the G7 over 2021 and 2022. Cumulative growth over the 2022 to 2024 period is predicted to be higher than that of Germany or Japan, and at a similar rate to that of France or the US. We have halved unemployment, cut inequality and reduced the number of workless households by 1 million. We have protected pensioners, those on low incomes and those with disabilities. We are continuing to lay the groundwork for a vibrant, innovative and growing economy that benefits communities and families up and down the country.

Having sat and listened to the shadow Minister—I was not smiling, but reflecting on what I heard—I think it is very unfortunate that the Labour party continues to play politics and snipe from the sidelines without a clear and coherent plan.