

Maria Caulfield's Report - March 2024

Please accept my apologies that I am unable to join you at your upcoming meeting. I do however have the following updates for the parish.

Drop in Energy Price Cap

I am delighted to welcome Ofgem's announcement regarding a significant reduction in the energy price cap for the second quarter of 2024. This decision will bring about a 12.3% decrease compared to the previous quarter, effective from April 1 to June 30, 2024. For the average household using dual fuel and paying by direct debit, this means an annual savings of £238, equating to around £20 per month. This reduction signifies the lowest energy prices we've seen since the escalation of tensions due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which significantly inflated wholesale energy costs. I attribute this positive development to the government's Energy Price Guarantee, which helped mitigate bill increases during that turbulent period. I am hopeful that this trend of declining energy prices will continue, aiming to return to historical averages.

Government Crackdown on Bonuses for Water Company Bosses

I am pleased to support the announcement that water bosses will be prohibited from receiving bonuses if their company has committed serious criminal breaches. This initiative, led by Ofwat, the water regulator, will undergo a consultation to determine the specific criteria for implementing such a ban, which may include instances like Category 1 or 2 pollution incidents or serious management failings. The ban, applicable to executive board members and Chief Executives, is expected to be enforced later this year pending consultation outcomes. If enacted, Ofwat will implement these measures by modifying the conditions of water company licenses, leveraging powers granted through the Environment Act 2021. Notably, last year, 10 water bosses received bonuses amounting to £2.5 million, highlighting the necessity of such regulatory measures. These actions align with the government's broader strategy to combat pollution, enhance water quality, and secure a sustainable water supply for the future. It is imperative that we hold water companies accountable for illegal behavior, and I encourage everyone to participate in the consultation process when it commences.

NHS Dental Recovery Plan

I am thrilled to endorse the Government's NHS Dental Recovery Plan, a crucial component of its long-term strategy to enhance access to NHS dentistry and fulfill the Prime Minister's commitment to reducing waiting lists. With £200 million in new Government funding, this plan outlines a comprehensive set of initiatives aimed at providing an additional 2.5 million NHS dental appointments over the next year, strategically allocating them where they are most needed and expanding preventative care for younger children to combat tooth decay.

You can search for local dentists using the NHS Find a Dentist Website ([Find a dentist - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)) or you can call 0300 123 1663 for more information. Dentists are required to update the NHS Website to say whether they are accepting NHS patients. All NHS Dental Services are open to anyone from any area and you can receive care in any practice able to offer you an appointment

Launch of Pharmacy First

I am thrilled to welcome the launch of the Pharmacy First service, which commenced today, January 31st. This innovative service empowers community pharmacists to provide comprehensive care for patients without necessitating a visit to their GP. Alongside expansions to pharmacy blood pressure checking and contraception services, this initiative is projected to save up to 10 million general practice team appointments annually, facilitating quicker and more convenient access to care, including the provision of appropriate medicines for minor illnesses. Joined by the Prime Minister at a pharmacy for the launch, I have been a longstanding advocate for the Pharmacy First model, championing it even during my tenure as Minister for Primary Care.

Highly trained pharmacists will now have the capacity to assess and treat patients for various conditions without the need for a GP appointment or prescription, including sinusitis, sore throat, earache, infected insect bite, impetigo, shingles, and uncomplicated urinary tract infections in women under 65.

This launch signifies a significant step forward in enhancing access to healthcare, and I extend my gratitude to pharmacists nationwide for their invaluable contributions to our communities, providing essential advice and care.

Homes and Beds to help Hundreds of Rough Sleepers off the Streets

I welcome the news that a share of £220 million of government funding is being allocated to our local council today, aimed at preventing hundreds of families from facing homelessness and providing essential support to help rough sleepers transition off the streets. Minister for Housing and Homelessness, Felicity Buchan, unveiled this funding boost, targeting areas most in need and emphasising specialist support for the most vulnerable individuals requiring mental health or substance misuse assistance.

The allocation includes £107 million to facilitate the provision of over 800 homes for rough sleepers, enabling councils to promptly acquire or rent properties to offer these individuals a secure environment as they rebuild their lives. Additionally, a £109 million boost to the Homelessness Prevention Grant expands the capacity of councils to intervene before evictions occur or to fund temporary accommodation, bringing the total fund to £1.2 billion and supporting more than 160,000 people since its inception in 2022.

Furthermore, an additional £6 million is earmarked to augment off-street spaces for rough sleepers during winter, ensuring access to warm and safe shelter along with essential services. With this investment, the government's commitment to tackling homelessness and eradicating rough sleeping is reinforced, with a total investment of £2.4 billion over three years (2022-25) dedicated to this crucial cause.