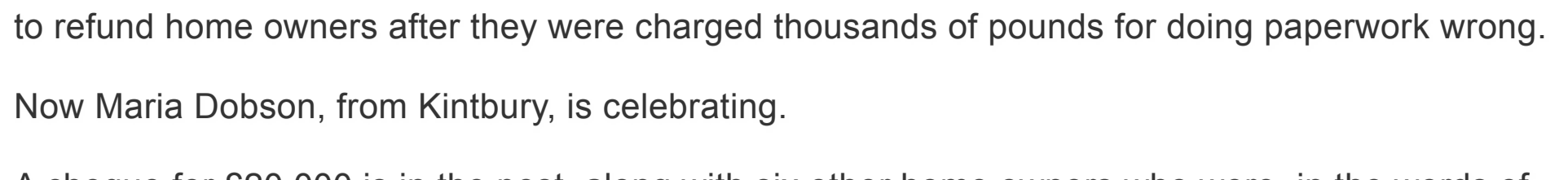


# Council repays homeowners with CIL payments after nine-year campaign

By Niki Hinman Local Democracy Reporter  
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She's been dubbed West Berkshire's 'Alan Bates' for her nine years campaigning to get the council to refund home owners after they were charged thousands of pounds for doing paperwork wrong.

Now Maria Dobson, from Kintbury, is celebrating.

A cheque for £20,000 is in the post, along with six other home owners who were, in the words of the council leader, "disgracefully" charged thousands of pounds by "unpleasant and overzealous" officers.

She says the flood gates for other claims are likely to follow, from West Berkshire residents and home owners who've faced a similar fate from other councils.

West Berkshire Council is believed to be the first local authority to review CIL payments and to make discretionary payments where residents have made mistakes with the paperwork.

"The stress it has brought on us as a family has been absolutely horrendous," said Ms Dobson, "let alone the constant embarrassment of having signs put up in front of the house saying we owed money."

West Berkshire Council previously adopted a 'zero-tolerance' approach to incorrect paperwork for home improvements.

Residents who completed council forms wrongly were charged a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) – charges made by councils on new developments.

Typically, they are used to pay for infrastructure such as schools and roads which a housing development might require.

Self-built annexes and home extensions are normally exempt.

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Ms Dobson said she was "bullied" into paying an extra charge of almost £25,000 for work on her house.

It all started back in 2015, when the council introduced CIL payments.

Ms Dobson put a side extension for a new kitchen and a loft conversion on her bungalow.

"We had no idea what was in front of us. All that was needed was a phone call or letter to tell us we had done it wrong.

"It was complicated and a simple mistake made. They didn't say paperwork wasn't correct.

"They hit us with the bill within days. We had to take loans out to settle the bill to get them off our back. "

She said a council officer posted notices about the fee outside her property and called through her letterbox when she did not answer the door.

West Berkshire Council is writing to six homeowners to confirm the outcome of the reviews and to arrange discretionary payments to them. Those homeowners will be receiving discretionary payments between £12,000 and £40,000.

Under the scheme introduced by the council, any applicant who is unsuccessful at review will have the opportunity to appeal the decision and present their case in person to a panel of councillors for further consideration.

Welcoming the decision, council leader Jeff Brooks said: "As a result of the new review process we introduced homeowners are seeing the return of money they should never have been liable to pay.

"This is the right thing for us to do, and underlines our commitment to listen to residents and to act with fairness, integrity and a focus on our customers.

"I am delighted that this issue that has caused so much distress and going back to 2015 is finally being resolved."

Ms Dobson says she still won't believe it's over until the cheque arrives – and is angry.

She said: "Nine years this has taken. The council has hired barristers and all sorts.

"I couldn't afford to do that.

"How much has this cost the taxpayer? It is the same as the Post Office scandal in that I thought I was the only one.

"It was just little me against the forces of the legal team at WBC.

"I couldn't afford to take them to court and pay barristers."

She paid tribute to the Lib Dem council leader Jeff Brooks. "He's been amazing," she said.

But she slammed the previous Conservative administration.

"It's been shameful the way the Conservatives acted on this," she added, reserving praise for two former Tory councillors – Claire Rowles and James Cole – who fought her corner against their party whip.

She is now urging others who also feel wrongly served, saying the council had acted morally and ethically wrongly.

Newbury Politics Update Me Niki Hinman Local Democracy Reporter

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