

# 'The council hammered a sign for a £20,000 tax bill into my front lawn'

The shocking community infrastructure levy bill ruined one homeowner's extension plans — 'and all because someone didn't tick a box'

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The sign in her front garden from West Berkshire council

Dobson's ordeal stems from a somewhat obscure tax known as the community infrastructure levy (CIL), which exists to ensure property developers contribute to local amenities such as schools and roads. However, homeowners such as Dobson, who simply want to build an extension or a home for themselves, must exempt themselves from the tax by filling out a complex web of time-dated forms. If they forget to do so, they face ruinous bills — strenuously enforced by revenue-hungry councils — with little chance to appeal.

In 2015, Dobson and her husband, a civil servant, applied for permission to build a modest extension to their family home in Kintbury, a village five miles west of Newbury in west Berkshire. The couple wanted a new kitchen and additional bedrooms. They hired an agent to handle the planning paperwork — but what they didn't know was that a critical box on an exemption form had not been ticked. West Berkshire council later claimed that the form had never been received. Crucially though, no one told the Dobsons.

Shortly after construction began, the couple received a CIL bill for £20,000. Retrospective exemption was not allowed, the council said. They had broken the rules by starting the building work, and so they had to pay the original charge plus daily interest at 2.5 per cent above the base rate. The total owed ballooned to almost £25,000. "Every month or so, someone from the council would turn up and put a new sign in as the bill went up," Dobson says.

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Images showed council officers peering through Dobson's letterbox

Dobson's fightback began with a freedom of information request for the photographs taken of her home by the council. She received 62 images, including some showing officers peering through her letterbox that were scribbled over to hide their identities. From there, she began to educate herself on the council's procedures. "Local authorities should have a duty of care to help their residents — they know that the CIL process is complicated," she says. "But they offered me no help or guidance. These are life-changing amounts of money for people."

Eventually she set up a petition demanding a council debate, which gathered more than 1,500 signatures. The council tried to invalidate it by removing names of signatories who they claimed didn't live or work in the area. "I honestly believe that if you've got an outstanding tax bill, it's easier to deal with the inland revenue than it is to deal with the council," Dobson says.

She found an ally in Claire Rowles, a Conservative councillor at the time and qualified lawyer who had helped another resident, Roger

McCabe, when he had been issued a £60,000 bill.

The disparity in treatment between the two cases was stark, Rowles says. "For Roger, they had waived a whole lot of interest and they said to him he could have a payment plan. With Maria, they said you've got to pay interest and we're going to take you to court if you don't pay right now."

Rowles pushed back, even as senior figures in the council tried to silence her. "They told me to step away," she says. "But it was morally and ethically wrong." Her stand cost her all of her committee positions, and eventually she chose not to seek re-election.

In 2023, the Liberal Democrats swept to power in West Berkshire. Jeff Brooks, the leader, made Dobson's campaign a key part of their manifesto. "She's been our local Mr Bates on this issue," Brooks says, referencing the Post Office scandal campaigner [Alan Bates](#).

Once in office, Brooks commissioned a full review of CIL enforcement and what was found, he says, was "egregious". There was no written enforcement policy. The previous administration had relied on heavy-handed (though technically legal) practices, including signs posted on front lawns, threats of prison sentences and interest compounding daily. "We're talking tens of thousands of pounds for getting forms wrong or submitting them late," Brooks says.

West Berkshire council sought legal advice and discovered it could retroactively "reissue" CIL assessments at a value of zero. In total, 18 residents were refunded about £350,000. Dobson was among them, although she still had to cover interest on a loan she had taken out to pay the council. Her extension remains unfinished

because the couple ran out of money. "It's financially crippled us," she says.

Her decade-long campaign may have left a mark on her finances, but it also changed the political landscape of her county. "I didn't start this as a campaign," she says. "But when I got my money back, I knew I had to speak up for everyone else."

- ['The council hit me with a £67,000 tax bill to build my extension'](#)

While the sum was small compared with the £13 million in CIL funds held by the council at the time, Brooks insists that refunding it was the right thing to do. "If we had to give back £1 million, we should still have done it because it was money we should not have collected," he says.

He believes the approach now taken in West Berkshire, where CIL charges are set to zero for extensions and self-builds where applicable, should be a model for the rest of the country.

Today, less than a quarter of councils offer flexibility for homeowners who make honest mistakes regarding CIL forms, according to data collected by campaigners. Four councils and five London boroughs exempt them entirely, but in many areas the system remains opaque, rigid and punishing.

Research by the trade body the Home Builders Federation estimates that local authorities in England and Wales are sitting on a total £1.8 billion in unspent CIL money, which is earning them millions of pounds in interest.

It is up to local councils to choose to adopt CIL, and legal advice

differs from borough to borough. In Waverley, Surrey, where the local MP, Jeremy Hunt, is campaigning for a change in the law, council officers are believed to be concerned that the CIL liability remains with the property, even if it's set at zero. Brooks disputes this, insisting his council's approach leaves "no tail on the property".

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Surrey residents and Jeremy Hunt (centre), the MP for Godalming and Ash, protest the community infrastructure levy (CIL)

Rowles agrees. She identifies several reasons why other councils may resist reform: fear of setting precedents, budgetary pressure, and the difficulty of clawing back already-spent funds from parish councils. But to her the moral case is clear. "It's almost like [local authorities] can't be seen to move their position because they think it's weakness," she says.

Brooks wants the central government to step in. He is calling for a statutory instrument to clarify CIL rules, stating explicitly that main-residence homeowners should not be charged. The broader problem, he warns, is national in scale.

CIL campaigners believe they have identified 50 residents in local authorities across the country who have collectively been charged more than £1.5 million for building on their own land.

For Dobson, the signs are finally gone from her garden, but the scars of the past ten years remain. "They ruined our finances, our plans, our peace of mind," she says. "And all because someone didn't tick a box."

Do you face a large CIL bill? Email [melissa.york@thetimes.co.uk](mailto:melissa.york@thetimes.co.uk)