

Press release: Prime Minister Theresa May's Thai Pongal message

[Watch the PM's message.](#)

As Thai Pongal begins, Tamil families here in the UK and around the world are coming together to celebrate. It's a time to cast out the old and embrace opportunities to come. A time to give thanks not just for the harvest, but also for friends, family and neighbours.

And it's also a great opportunity for all of us to reflect on the contribution made by Britain's Tamils. Your community punches well above its weight, making a real difference to countless lives right across the country.

I want this to be a country where everyone, regardless of their background, can play their part and achieve their ambitions. Our Tamil community is a fantastic example of what that looks like, helping make Britain the diverse, successful country we are all so proud of.

So to everyone celebrating today and in the days to come, let me wish you all a happy Thai Pongal, and an auspicious year ahead.

Press release: Immigration minister signs data sharing agreements with India on criminal records and returns

Two documents, known as memorandums of understanding (MOUs), were initialled by Minister of Immigration Caroline Nokes and Indian Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju on Thursday (January 11).

The new two-way deals reflect increased co-operation between the 2 countries which already enjoy a close relationship.

The MOU on criminal records exchange will lead to British and Indian law enforcement bodies sharing criminal records information, fingerprints and intelligence. This will assist the police in protecting the public from known criminals, including sex offenders. It will also allow the courts in both countries to access more information to support tougher sentencing decisions.

Meanwhile the agreement on returns paves the way for a quicker and more efficient process for documenting and returning Indian nationals who have no right to be in the UK to India. This has proven difficult in the past due to

some Indians not having the required paperwork or travel documentation for them to be accepted back in their home country.

This agreement commits both countries to taking a more flexible approach to verifying the identity and nationality of individuals, which will help speed up the returns process.

Ms Nokes said:

I was very pleased to welcome the Indian Home Affairs Minister to the UK. The agreements we've signed cover the important issues of returns and criminal records exchanges to the mutual benefit of both countries. The Minister's visit forms part of our ongoing dialogue and demonstrates the strong and positive relationship between our 2 nations.

As my predecessor in this role noted during his visit to India last November, we are determined to create a 'living bridge' of people, ideas, institutions and technology between our 2 great countries. These new agreements are yet another example of the value we place on our strong partnership.

Details of the types of information exchanged through the MOUs and operational procedures, together with the details of any restrictions on using or disclosing the information will be the subject of further negotiations. However, the documents recognise the need to respect privacy, civil liberties and human rights.

Mr Rijiju was visiting London at the invitation of Ms Nokes' predecessor, the Rt Hon Brandon Lewis, following their successful meeting in India in November 2017.

In addition to formalising the 2 agreements, Mr Rijiju also visited Heathrow Airport to see first-hand how Border Force uses technology such as biometrics and e-passport gates.

[Press release: Independent review to tackle barriers to building](#)

A vital independent review into understanding why hundreds of thousands of homes haven't been built, despite having planning permission, is underway as a panel of experts is today (14 January) unveiled by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Originally announced at Autumn Budget, the review, led by Sir Oliver Letwin

will look to explain the gap between the number of planning permissions being granted against those built in areas of high demand.

Currently, after planning permission is granted a variety of factors can prevent development from starting and slow down delivery and the review wants to determine why.

As of July 2016, just over half the 684,000 homes with planning permission had been completed.

The review will make recommendations on practical steps to increase the speed of build out. Latest evidence shows that residential planning applications are up and that time to process major applications continues to be at a record high.

Sir Oliver Letwin, Chairman of the Review Panel, said:

This Government is serious about finding ways to increase the speed of build out as well as tackling the complicated issues surrounding it.

That's why we have set up this diverse panel to help me test my analysis and to make practical, non-partisan recommendations, as we look to increase housing supply that's consistent with a stable UK housing market.

Housing Secretary Sajid Javid said:

We are determined to build the homes this country needs, but currently there is still a significant gap between the number of planning permissions being granted and the number of homes built.

This review is vital to helping us understand how we can build more homes quickly.

All parties have a role to play in closing the gap and I look forward to receiving Sir Oliver's findings.

The review will be conducted in two phases:

Phase 1 – currently under way – will seek to identify the main causes of the gap by reviewing large housing sites where planning permission has already been granted. This will include information-gathering sessions with local authorities, developers, non-Government organisations and others. Early findings will be published in the interim report.

Phase 2 will make recommendations on practical steps to increase the speed of build out, which will be published in the full report.

The review will also consider how to avoid interventions which might

discourage house building or hinder the regeneration of complex sites.

Sir Oliver will be assisted by a team of leading experts:

- Richard Ehrman – Small commercial property developer, author and journalist
- Lord Jitesh Gadhia – (Conservative) Peer and investment banker
- Lord John Hutton – (Labour) Peer and former Secretary of State
- Rt Hon Baroness Usha Prashar CBE – (Crossbench) Peer, currently Deputy Chairman British Council and a non-Executive Director of nationwide Building Society
- Professor Christine Whitehead – Emeritus Professor of Housing Economics at London School of Economics

- The Terms of Reference have been made available on the [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's website](#)
- The Housing White Paper set out how all parties in the development process need to play their part in speeding up the delivery of much-needed new homes. It set out a wide ranging approach to driving up build out of planning permissions
- The government is already taking the following the steps to tackle this issue:
 - Tackling unnecessary delays caused by too many planning conditions
 - Streamlining the approach to conserving the habitat of protected species
 - Simplifying developer contributions
 - Ensuring greater transparency in planning permissions around the pace of delivery
 - Taking an applicants track record into account when considering whether to grant a permission
 - Speeding up and simplifying Compulsory Purchase Orders

Press release: Government supports new measures to improve the safety of tenants

Secretary of State for Housing Sajid Javid today (14 January) confirmed government support for new legislation that will help ensure rented homes are safe and give tenants the right to take legal action when landlords fail in their duties.

The government has already introduced a range of powers for local authorities enabling them to crack down on the minority of landlords who rent out unsafe or substandard accommodation. This includes being able to fine failing landlords up to £30,000 and from April this year councils will also be able

to issue banning orders to kick the worst offenders out of the business.

However public safety is paramount which is why government will support further measures proposed by Karen Buck MP in a Private Members Bill to protect tenants in both the social and private rented sectors.

This will give them another route to take direction action and take their landlords to court if they don't ensure their property is fit for human habitation at the beginning of the tenancy and throughout.

Housing Secretary Sajid Javid said:

Everyone deserves a decent and safe place to live. Councils already have wide-ranging powers to crack down on the minority of landlords who rent out unsafe and substandard accommodation.

However, public safety is paramount and I am determined to do everything possible to protect tenants. That is why government will support new legislation that requires all landlords to ensure properties are safe and give tenants the right to take legal action if landlords fail in their duties.

Government has worked with Karen Buck MP to draft and publish the Private Members Bill on Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability of Housing Standards).

The Bill ensures:

- that all landlords (both social and private sector) must ensure that their property is fit for human habitation at the beginning of the tenancy and throughout and
- where a landlord fails to do so, the tenant has the right to take legal action in the courts for breach of contract on the grounds that the property is unfit for human habitation

Local authority powers to deal with landlords who rent out unsafe of substandard accommodation:

The Housing Health and Safety Rating System – which was introduced by the Housing Act 2004 – is already used by local authorities to assess whether a property contains potentially serious risks to the health and safety of the occupants.

Where a property does contain hazards, local authorities have strong powers under the Housing Act 2004 to require that landlords make necessary improvements to a property. Where a property contains potentially serious risks to the health and safety of the occupants, the local authority must take appropriate action requiring the landlord to reduce or remove the risk.

Government has brought forward a whole suite of measures to make sure local authorities effectively tackle rogue landlords who let unfit properties,

including:

- introducing, in April 2017, civil penalties up to £30,000, with the local authority able to keep the proceeds to fund enforcement
- extension of Rent Repayment Orders to cover illegal eviction, breach of a banning order or failure to comply with certain statutory notices (introduced April 2017)
- £12 million made available (2011-16) to a range of local authorities with acute problems with rogue landlords, resulting in the inspection of over 70,000 properties and more than 5,000 landlords facing further action or prosecution for breaking the law
- enabling the local authority to introduce a selective licensing scheme allowing it to target enforcement action where private rented housing in a particular area is suffering from or causing specific problems
- consulted on extending mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation, and following this will shortly be laying regulations

And we've got plans to introduce in April 2018:

- a database of rogue landlords and property agents convicted of certain offences
- banning orders for the most serious and prolific offenders

News story: Card surcharge ban means no more nasty surprises for shoppers

Hidden charges for paying with a debit or credit card will be banned from today (13 January), helping millions of UK consumers to avoid rip-off fees when spending their hard-earned money.

So-called 'surcharging' has become commonplace, particularly online, with many retailers hitting people with surprise charges just before they are about to make a purchase. Some retailers have been known to add charges which are far higher than it costs them to process a payment. It is estimated that surcharging cost Brits £166 million in 2015.

Today's ban means that it will be unlawful for retailers to charge additional fees when someone uses a particular credit or debit card, or other payment systems like PayPal, to make a purchase. This will ensure consumers can be confident that there won't be any nasty surprises, and they won't be penalised for wanting to pay in a particular way.

Economic Secretary to the Treasury, John Glen said:

It's completely unfair for someone to be hit by a hidden fee just

before they are about to make a purchase, so by scrapping these rip-off charges we are helping to give power back to the consumer.

As we build a fairer society, this added transparency ensures buyers can make informed choices about how they spend their hard-earned money.

The new rules will be enforced by Trading Standards who will have the power to take civil enforcement action against traders who breach the regulations. It will also entitle customers to receive a refund of any unlawful surcharge they have paid and enable them, if necessary, to take legal action to recover any such surcharge.

The ban on credit and debit card surcharges is effective across the EU from Saturday 13th January 2018, and will apply to all purchases made where the banks of the consumer and retailer are within the EEA. In the vast majority of other circumstances surcharges are capped at the cost to the retailer for processing the payment. The UK Government took the decision to also include other payment methods such as PayPal in the ban to further protect consumers.