

Last September I was contacted by a constituent who was outraged that he had been charged a not inconsiderable sum because he did not wish to pay his utility bills via direct debit. I share his view and this week Parliament had an excellent debate on this, relating specifically to energy bills.

Over 45% of the UK still pays their bills by other methods than direct debit. I have only recently converted to direct debit, albeit reluctantly, on the basis that I kept forgetting to pay and therefore incurring late charges. It is a method designed to help busy people manage their accounts. But I cannot help notice that almost every quarter there has been some adjustment to my charge based on the energy I used being less or more than what was predicted. I am thinking of cancelling the direct debit and going back to paying on demand.

But my personal circumstances aside, it is the poorest and most vulnerable who are routinely ripped off by energy companies when it comes to paying for the most essential of items, gas and electric by other methods than direct debit. Those on lower incomes often prefer to manage their finances by paying for things by cash or cheque, and over a 1 million UK adults do not even have access to bank accounts.

These people are sadly also most at risk of living in fuel poverty, and living in the least energy efficient houses. It is therefore unreasonable for energy companies to add such extortionate charges onto energy bills, targeting these people, especially in light of their price hikes and extremely large profits.

Parliament spoke forcefully on this issue, and I was delighted to contribute to the debate. It is now time for the companies to listen and become more transparent on their charges and stop this stealth levy on consumers.