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Inflation stuck at 1.3%

The main inflation measures showed no change in February, official figures show.

In January, the annual rate of inflation – as measured by the Retail Prices Index (RPI) – remained at 1.3%. It is, however, the highest rate for 14 months as it was last lower in the December 2014 at 1.6%.

The rising cost of consumer durables was offset by a fall in alcohol and tobacco.

Inflation under the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) continued at what is now a 13-month high, with an annual rise of 0.3%.

For the 26th month, the CPI was below the 2% target set by the Treasury for the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee in its deliberations on interest rates.

The Office for National Statistics said the biggest downward pressure on the inflation rate came from the transport sector, with price changes for items, such as road passenger transport, second-hand cars and bicycles, offset by rises in a number of food items such as vegetables, milk, cheese and eggs.

TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady said: "Continuing low inflation is a sign that the economy is not operating at full strength. With the global

economy slowing down, the government missed an opportunity to support stronger growth in last week's Budget."

Price inflation

	% increase on a year earlier			
	RPI ¹	RPI	RPIX ²	CPI
January 2015	255.4	1.1	1.2	0.3
February	256.7	1.0	1.0	0.0
March	257.1	0.9	0.9	0.0
April	258.0	0.9	0.9	-0.1
May	258.5	1.0	1.1	0.1
June	258.9	1.0	1.1	0.0
July	258.6	1.0	1.1	0.1
August	259.8	1.1	1.2	0.0
September	259.6	0.8	0.9	-0.1
October	259.5	0.7	0.8	-0.1
November	259.8	1.1	1.1	0.1
December	260.6	1.2	1.3	0.2
January 2016	258.8	1.3	1.4	0.3
February	260.0	1.3	1.4	0.3

¹ January 1987=100 ² RPI except mortgage interest payments

Just six of the 14 groups that make up the basket of goods used to calculate the RPI increased by more than the overall rise of 1.3%.

Clothing and footwear's increase of 6.5% included a 7.9% rise in the price of women's clothing and a 9.4% rise in children's clothing.

LABOUR RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

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The housing group's increase of 3.0% included a 3.1% increase in rents.

The fuel and light group posted an overall decrease of 4.4% and that included a 30.2% decrease in oil and other fuels and a 6.1% decrease in gas prices.

The food basket saw a fall of 2.2%, with prices down for most components. Bacon saw a 7.8% fall and poultry 5.8%, while bread prices were down by 3.9% and milk by 3.3%.

The motoring group's 0.4% fall included a 7.4% cut in the price of petrol and oil, offset by a 13.6% rise in vehicle tax and insurance.

More than 1.3%	%	Less than 1.3%	%
Clothing & footwear	6.5	Personal goods & services	1.1
Tobacco	4.3	Household goods	1.0
Household services	3.0	Fares etc	0.9
Housing	3.0	Alcoholic drink	0.1
Leisure services	2.7	Motoring expenditure	-0.4
Catering	1.7	Leisure goods	-0.7
		Food	-2.2
		Fuel & light	-4.4

www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/consumerpriceinflation/feb2016

Working mothers-to-be face discrimination

Three out of four working mothers say they have experienced pregnancy and maternity discrimination, new research suggests. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) says this is the equivalent of 390,000 women, experiencing negative and potentially discriminatory treatment at work each year.

The research, carried out in partnership with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, shows that despite 77% of working mothers reporting potentially discriminatory or negative experiences, only around a quarter (28%) raised the issue with their employer, only 3% went through their employer's internal grievance procedure, and less than 1% pursued a claim to the employment tribunal.

The survey of more than 3,000 mothers and 3,000 employers shows a range of reasons for this including the financial cost of pursuing a claim, fear of negative repercussions at work, lack of information about their rights, and stress and tiredness. Since the introduction in 2013 of tribunal fees of up to

£1,200, the number of sex discrimination cases has dropped by 76% and pregnancy-related cases fell by 50%.

Astonishingly, in this day and age, the majority of employers (70%) thought a woman should declare at recruitment stage if they were pregnant, and a quarter thought that it was reasonable to question women of childbearing age at interview about their plans to have children. In addition to this, three in four (77%) mothers that were unsuccessful in their job interviews undertaken while pregnant (where the employer had known about their pregnancy) felt it had affected their chances of success.

The EHRC called on the government to:

- take more effective steps to prevent employers asking during the recruitment process about a woman's pregnancy or her intention to have children;
- explore the feasibility of a collective insurance scheme to support small and medium-sized employers to provide enhanced pay and cover for maternity leave, based on a successful model used in Denmark;
- make changes to the employment tribunal fee system to ensure that fees are not a barrier to accessing justice for pregnant women and new mothers; and
- consider increasing from three to six months the time limit for a woman to bring an employment tribunal case involving pregnancy and maternity discrimination.

EHRC deputy chair Caroline Waters said: "We want to make workplaces fairer for everyone and get rid of outdated practices like asking women during job interviews whether they intend to have children. For businesses to thrive, they need to harness the talents, skills and experience of all employees."

The commission has called on employers, regulatory bodies and the voluntary sector to make vital changes needed to improve ... British workplaces so they are the best they can be for everyone.

TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady said: "It's disgraceful that tens of thousands of women are forced from their job each year due to pregnancy discrimination and that most struggle to enforce their rights.

"Women who have lost their jobs should not have to pay £1,200 to take a case to an employment tribunal.

"The government should also recognise the vital role unions play in combatting pregnancy discrimination. This report shows that employers who work closely with trade unions have greater awareness

of pregnant women's rights and better policies to support them.

She urges "every working woman to join a union to make sure they are represented and their voice is heard".

www.equalityhumanrights.com/three-four-working-mothers-say-they%E2%80%99ve-experienced-pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination
www.tuc.org.uk/equality-issues/workplace-issues/tuc-calls-urgent-action-new-report-reveals-77-working-mums-have

Government complicit in gender pay gap

The lack of effective policy in many of the areas that contribute to the gender pay gap is highlighted in a report by a cross-party committee of MPs.

The women and equalities committee's second report on the gender pay gap finds that the key causes of pay differentials are: the part-time pay penalty; women's disproportionate responsibility for childcare and other forms of unpaid caring; and the concentration of women in highly feminised, low paid sectors like care, retail and cleaning.

The committee argues that although the government has committed to eliminating the gender pay gap within a generation, it has remained at around the same level for the past four years. Women aged over 40 are most affected by the gender pay gap, with women aged 50-59 facing a 27% differential. Evidence suggests that the barriers to well-paid work currently experienced by women over 40 will continue unless action is taken to address the root causes of the gender pay gap.

There is strong evidence of the economic and productivity benefits of tackling the gender pay gap. And, says the committee, the best organisations recognise this and are taking steps to offer flexible working and improve job design to attract and retain talent. However, the productivity case for reducing the gender pay gap has not been made strongly enough to all employers across the UK. Government, business, trade bodies, unions and public sector organisations must all work to move the discussion about the gender pay gap beyond one of equality, to one of economic necessity.

The report finds that flexible working is high on the list of priorities for millennials and employers are beginning to recognise it can help them improve productivity as well as attract and retain talent. These changes to the workplace can be harnessed to reduce the gender pay gap.

However, the committee slates the lack of leadership shown by government ministers in addressing the question of flexible hiring as deeply disappointing. It says that the benefits of flexibility are fully accepted by government, yet policies encouraging employers to create more opportunities for flexible working are not forthcoming. And by refusing to act, the government is complicit in a system that is undermining productivity and perpetuating the gender pay gap.

The committee's recommendation on flexibility is that all jobs should be available to work flexibly unless an employer can demonstrate an immediate and continuing business case against doing so.

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) should update its guidance to employers explaining legal requirements to offer flexible work; the benefits of flexible hiring; and the potential risk of indirect discrimination if employers do not consider whether newly advertised roles and existing positions could be worked flexibly.

EHRC guidance should make clear that flexible working is not just about part-time working but can include working remotely, adjusted hours and job-sharing, with examples and case studies on good practice, the report says.

www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmwomeq/584/584.pdf

Stiffer sentences over dangerous dogs

Owners convicted of dangerous dogs offences will face harsher punishments under new guidelines announced by the Sentencing Council.

The council, which is accountable to the Ministry of Justice and whose members include the Director of Public Prosecutions, experienced judges, barristers, senior police officers, a magistrate, a leading academic in criminology and the head of the Probation Chief's Association, has introduced these guidelines following changes to dangerous dog offences legislation in 2014.

These changes – amendments to the *Dangerous Dogs Act* – extended the law to include attacks on private property, finally providing members of the Communication Workers' Union and other public service workers with full, legal protection.

The new sentencing guidelines, which come into force from July in crown and magistrate courts

across England and Wales, increase the maximum sentence for a dangerous dog offence where someone is killed from two to 14 years and, for where someone is injured, from two to five years.

Consistent with the changes to the law, the guidelines are also intended to encourage courts, where appropriate, to use their other powers to ban people from keeping dogs or to order them to pay compensation to victims.

The CWU is pressing for the rest of the UK to follow suit and introduce the stiffer sentences.

The union's national health, safety and environment officer Dave Joyce said: "Part of our 'Bite-Back' campaign's objectives was to get tougher sentences and we have achieved that. The new guidance enables the courts to use the new powers effectively.

"Sadly, the CWU represents the largest group and number of dog attack victims in the UK, with around 4,000 postal and telecom workers attacked every year."

www.cwu.org/media/news/2016/march/17/stiffer-sentences-for-attack-dog-owners/

Defeats for Tories in Lords over unions

The government was defeated in three votes on the *Trade Union Bill* in the House of Lords on 16 March.

On the Bill's first day of its report stage, the votes concerned substantial amendments to the bill on electronic balloting, facility time for union reps, and the funds used by unions for political campaigning. In three votes, the government was defeated nearly two to one, with several Conservative peers supporting amendments to the Bill or abstaining.

Lord Kerslake, the former head of the civil service who is now an independent crossbencher, led the amendment on electronic ballots, saying it was a "tried and tested" way of increasing participation.

The bill aims to impose a minimum 50% turnout in strike ballots, with key public sector strikes requiring the backing of at least 40% of those eligible to vote.

"If we are to apply these high tests before industrial action can be taken, then it is incumbent on us to provide trade unions with the best practical means

available to achieve the full participation of their members," Kerslake said.

TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady said it was "a bad day for the government".

She said: "These defeats should be the nails in the coffin of the whole *Trade Union Bill*."

"The government has tried to force this bill through parliament, ignoring objections from all sides of the House. Once again, peers have rightly held them back.

"The government needs to think again and withdraw this damaging and divisive bill."

www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/lords/by-date/#session=27&year=2016&month=2&day=16

www.tuc.org.uk/union-issues/trade-union-bill/triple-whammy-defeat-government-over-trade-union-bill-says-tuc

Care home owner faces equal pay claim

Female carers are taking their employer to the High Court over an equal pay claim.

The GMB general, on behalf of 87 members, has instructed lawyers Leigh Day to launch proceedings against Avery Homes, which runs 45 care homes across Britain.

The union says carers – overwhelmingly women – are on less favourable conditions to those employed by Avery in male-dominated roles, such as caretakers. It hopes to repeat the successes it has had in forcing local councils to pay the female carers they employ the same rate as men.

Leigh Day's Chris Benson said carers provide "an invaluable service looking after vulnerable individuals who most need our support and assistance".

He added: "It is only right those carrying out such work are properly rewarded and not underpaid because of their gender."

GMB national officer for the care sector Justin Bowden said paying female staff less than men amounts to "discrimination and it is against the law".

www.gmb.org.uk/newsroom/high-court-claims-against-avery-homes

www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-e5fc-Carers-take-Avery-Homes-to-court-in-equal-pay-push