



News
from
Westminster
Jan/Feb 2016

No. 82



Report from Sharon Hodgson MP



Sharon makes an intervention on behalf of constituents during a Westminster Hall debate on transitional state pension arrangements, affecting women born in the 1950s, known as WASPI, sparked nationally by E-petition 110776.

Student loans

After the Coalition Government trebled tuition fees back in 2011, the Conservatives have again hit prospective students from low-income families, who are starting university this September, by scrapping maintenance grants in favour of a loan system.

The maintenance grants are non-repayable grants of up to £3,387 and are designed to provide that extra financial support to students from low-income families with their living costs.

These grants are an integral source of income for an estimated 500,000 university students and research by the National Union of Students (NUS) showed that 52% of students surveyed saw maintenance grants as absolutely essential in making their decision to go on to University.

Replacing maintenance grants with loans will seriously affect students from low-income backgrounds, who are estimated to face an extra £12,500 worth of debt upon graduation, rising from £40,500 to £53,000. This will only exacerbate the current situation in England where students

from more affluent backgrounds are more than twice as likely to go on to higher education than their less affluent peers. With maintenance grants scrapped, this gap will only widen.

With this in mind, Labour is opposing these changes as they will negatively impact students from the lowest income families. Though we opposed this change during delegated legislation, we thought this was too important a change not to be fully debated on the floor of the House of Commons and used one of our allotted opposition debates to raise our concerns and force the Government to make a u-turn.

Unfortunately, the Government won the vote, albeit with a majority of only 14 – the smallest majority they have had this Parliament.

Though we may have lost the vote, MPs on the Labour benches are still committed to ensuring young people from the poorest backgrounds reach their full potential, whether by going on to university or getting a high-quality apprenticeship. Instead of deterring young people from poorer backgrounds, the Tory Government should be encouraging them and supporting them with every opportunity possible.

Food Waste Bill

As the 5th richest country in the world, it is a damning indictment of our society when families go hungry and in the last five years under the Tories we have seen an explosion in the use of food banks across the country with more and more children going to school hungry.

Despite this, Labour's Shadow Environment Secretary, Kerry McCarthy MP has identified that over 15 million tonnes of food and drink are wasted in the UK every year, with 3% of food waste generated by the food retail sector. I've had many constituents contact me about this matter and the issue of hunger in our society – and it is something that I am all too aware of as Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for School Food.

Before her appointment to the Shadow Cabinet, Kerry led a campaign to introduce legislation not dissimilar to that of France on food waste, and will continue to push on her Private Member's Bill which will be debated soon and continue her campaign to minimise the food waste we produce. I fully support her in this endeavour.

In Parliament

Prime Minister's Questions



At PMQs on 13th January, I pressed the Prime Minister on the future of clean energy and business, and cited Nissan here in Sunderland, who are keen to promote green investment. But his Government's decision last year to scrap Renewables Obligation Certificates will have a detrimental impact on the £3 million investment planned for the windfarms at the Turbine Industrial Park. As usual he defended his decision.

Cancer Drugs Fund Roundtable meeting

In April of this year, the Government will be reforming the Cancer Drugs Fund which provides the vital drugs cancer patients in England need. That is why, as Chair of the Ovarian Cancer APPG and Co-Chair of the Breast Cancer APPG, I attended a roundtable to discuss what the Government can do to help patients gain access to life-saving drugs as the fund evolves.

Child Obesity Debate



With the Government's childhood obesity strategy to be published soon, I spoke in a Backbench Business Debate on the benefits of healthy school food, especially when free, and called for the Government to include

school food as part of the upcoming strategy, along with addressing child holiday hunger – which has sadly become a growing problem in this country.

In the Constituency

Meeting with Children North East Charity



I met with Sara Bryson, Policy & Research Manager from Children North East and school pupil, Emma True, to discuss the health and wellbeing of children at school and how no child should be going hungry. This included a conversation about left-over money from a free school meal in cashless payment systems and the issue of holiday hunger, and what the next steps will be in our campaigns to address these issues.

Sunderland Youth Parliament meeting



As part of their #DontHateEducate campaign, I met with three of Sunderland's Youth Parliamentarians – Thomas, Rachel, & Luwam, to talk about what Youth Parliamentarians and Westminster Parliamentarians can do to address the increase in hate crimes seen in recent years, along with what more can be done at a local level to improve mental health services for young people.

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