



Alan Campbell MP Weekly Update

Friday 2nd March 2018



Commons News

Homelessness (Estimates Day Debate)

On Tuesday, the House of Commons considered the estimated spending of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on homelessness.

While the number of people sleeping rough fell between 1997 and 2010, it has more than doubled since 2010 and is up for the eighth year in a row.

I believe this is a direct result of decisions made by Ministers: a steep drop in investment for affordable homes; cuts to housing benefit; reduced funding for homelessness services; and a refusal to help private renters.

There are now more than 120,000 children living in temporary accommodation and the four-year freeze of the local housing allowance has the potential to put over one million households at risk of homelessness by 2020.

The Government cannot claim it is serious about tackling the housing crisis when the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has handed back £742 million of funding for housing schemes to the Treasury.

I believe the Government should commit to ending rough sleeping, and tackle the root causes of rising homelessness with more affordable homes and stronger rights for renters.

Ministers should start by making 8,000 homes available for those with a history of rough sleeping and increase security for private renters with new three-year tenancies and controls on rent rises.

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland: Border Arrangements (Urgent Question)

On Wednesday, the Foreign Secretary was asked to make a statement on future border arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland after the UK's exit from the European Union. This followed the leaking of details of a memo sent by the Foreign Secretary to the Prime Minister.

The Foreign Secretary has previously said that "there can be no return to a hard border" between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. However, in the memo, the Foreign Secretary apparently suggests that the Government should not see it as its task to maintain "no border".

Unfortunately, the Foreign Secretary did not respond himself on Wednesday. However, the Minister for the Cabinet Office reiterated the Government's stance that it will not accept a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

I fear the leaked memo shows that the Government is saying one thing in public and another in private. It is time for any deception to come to an end. I believe the only way a hard border in Northern Ireland can be avoided is by staying in a customs union with the EU. Given that the Government has ruled that out, it must spell out in detail how it intends to avoid a hard border.

Department for Transport (Estimates Day Debate)

On Tuesday, the House of Commons considered the estimated spending of the Department for Transport.

I am concerned that poor planning is systemic in the allocation of transport funds, as the Government has made a mockery of financial planning periods for the railways and road investment strategies. Processes that were designed to provide certainty have instead turned into chaos.

It is concerning that passenger rail income for this year is £248.6 million less than expected due to a decline in revenues from a number of train franchises, including Thameslink, Southern and Greater Anglia, and the Treasury is expected to pay an additional £60 million to cover this shortfall. This fall in revenue also follows the Government's multi-billion pound bailout of Virgin Stagecoach on the East Coast franchise. I believe the Government must come clean as to how much this will cost. It is unacceptable that the public continues to have to bail out a broken franchise system.

On the roads network, the new road vehicle tax system is losing £107 million per year, rather than bringing in the £10 million it promised. In addition, we have seen road investment projects cancelled, 22 projects delayed and 19 enhancements pushed back into the next control period.

I am concerned that this is all evidence of the Government's poor stewardship of public money. I believe we must have a publicly owned railway, buses under council control and a proper plan to serve our communities.

Department for Exiting the European Union (Estimates Day Debate)

On Monday, there was an Estimates Day debate on the expenditure of the Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU).

It is far from clear what we have been getting for our money from DExEU. The Government wasted £1.4 million fighting in the courts to stop Parliament voting on the decision to trigger Article 50. Then, when Article 50 was triggered, the Government spent nearly £1,000 to hand-deliver the letter.

The National Audit Office has found that staff churn – people moving between roles and departments or leaving – in DExEU is 9% per quarter, whereas the civil service average is 9% per year.

I agree with the Institute for Government therefore when it says that this degree of churn in the department at the forefront of co-ordinating the complicated task of leaving the EU is a cause for concern. 44% of DExEU staff also plan to leave the department within the next year.

The Government was pressed on Monday on the extent to which DExEU's inability to recruit and retain staff was responsible for its underspend.

I believe the Government is failing in so many of its responsibilities and the excuse often given is that it is focusing on Brexit. If Brexit was going well and DExEU was not so unstable, Ministers could be forgiven for their lack of progress on other issues.

Unfortunately, I fear that DExEU's rapid decline into chaos, division and incompetence is just an apt metaphor for the Government as a whole.

Mental Health Act: CQC Report (Urgent Question)

On Tuesday, the Government was asked to make a statement on the Care Quality Commission's (CQC) latest report on the use of the Mental Health Act.

The report found that the number of detentions under the Mental Health Act has risen by 36% since 2010, increasing by more than 5,000 between 2015 and 2016. There has been limited or no improvement on the key concerns the CQC has raised in previous years and the system is reported to be "under considerable pressure".

Rather than taking a preventive approach to mental health treatment, the Government has made real-terms funding cuts which mean that more people are at risk of being detained and fewer detentions are being prevented. Crucially, those cuts are causing less restrictive alternatives for the community to be removed at the same time as the reductions in the number of beds for admissions.

Research by the Royal College of Psychiatrists has shown that mental health services have less money to spend on patient care in real terms than they did in 2012, and more than a quarter of clinical commissioning groups underspent their mental health budgets last year. It is time for Ministers to increase funding for mental health and ring-fence mental health budgets to ensure that money reaches the frontline.

Seasonal Migrant Workers (Backbench Business Debate)

On Thursday, the House of Commons debated a backbench motion on seasonal migrant workers.

There is clear consensus in Parliament that the Government needs to take urgent action on this issue.

This is particularly the case for farming and agriculture which have the most pressing need for seasonal migrant workers. An estimated 90-95% of seasonal workers in food processing and agriculture are from other EU countries and the sector is already having difficulty finding labour to meet its needs. I am concerned that while the Government has acknowledged the extent of the problem, it has not committed to doing anything about it.

It is important to note that other sectors such as hospitality, tourism and care work are also reliant on seasonal migrant workers.

We have just gone through a winter crisis in the NHS, yet it is turning away desperately needed staff because Britain has hit the cap on skilled visas for the third month in a row.

I believe we must provide certainty for different sectors, and a long-term solution to labour shortages in our most important industries. We should take decisive action to reinstate the seasonal agriculture workers scheme and design an immigration policy based around the needs of the economy.

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