



WE HAVE TO REFORM THE BENEFITS SYSTEM

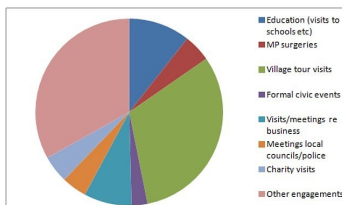
There is a genuine sense of unfairness that the welfare system has been left in such a mess by Labour, with too many people better off out of work and on benefits than if they entered the world of work. This is why I have written and responded robustly on this issue.

People see it as unfair that benefit claimants can receive higher incomes than families who are in work. I agree. That's why the

Government wants to introduce a cap on benefits – so that no family can get more on benefits than the average family does by going out to work. I think the limit proposed is set at a fair rate of £26,000 – the equivalent to someone earning £35,000 before tax, a salary that many working families would be happy to receive.

The Government's reforms are popular because they are right. One poll showed 76% approval for a cap. The House of Lords and particularly some bishops have tried to overturn these reforms. But they are not united. Former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, is quoted as saying that the current welfare system encourages fecklessness and irresponsibility and that the greatest moral scandal we face is that unless we get the deficit under control and start paying back the debt we will be mortgaging the future of our children and grandchildren.

Ed Miliband has fallen at the first hurdle and failed this key test of leadership and credibility. He promised to 'take the tough decisions' on reforming welfare and claimed that he supported the cap. But his party in the Lords backed an amendment that would wreck the cap. His tough words have been exposed as just posturing from a weak leader.



Engagements in 2011

As in the past, I have prepared an analysis of the engagements and activities I have undertaken in support of the constituency for the past year. In 2011 I undertook 254 engagements. These included almost 30 visits to schools or other educational organisations, over 20 visits to businesses or meetings with businesses, and over 20 meetings with charities and local councils. MPs are based in Westminster

Monday to Thursday. These types of activities are generally undertaken on constituency Fridays, and over weekends (especially for surgeries) as well as in the parliamentary recesses. The variety of these activities was wide in 2011 but a key component was my visit to 80 villages in the late summer in the course of 8 days – the most direct face-to-face engagement programme conducted by an MP in this constituency.



PLANNING

A number of constituents have asked how a planning inspector has been able to ride roughshod over parts of SODC's Core Strategy – its Local Plan. Under the existing law introduced by the last Government that is exactly the power planning inspectors have and it is yet another good example of why the previous planning system was broken.

Under the new legislation (the Localism Act), which I helped steer through Parliament, the local council alone will have the power to ask the inspector for recommendations as to how the plan may be changed if he or she thinks it cannot be adopted in its current form. If the local council does not make this request, the inspector will be unable to recommend any changes. In addition, local councils will not have to implement inspectors' recommendations. Where the inspector thinks the plan is unsound, the council will be able to make its own modifications and re-submit the draft document to the inspector for examination. We are delivering on our commitment to Localism.

The picture by the way is the first national caricature of me – slashing away at national targets to the anger of the Stalinist central planners of Labour.

QUESTIONS IN THE HOUSE

I have raised a number of key issues at questions in the House of Commons to a number of different Ministers. The main ones have been.



The National Infrastructure Plan

This is the first Government in this country to have a National Infrastructure Plan. The point I made to the Chief Secretary of the Treasury, Danny Alexander MP, was that this was important for two reasons. First, it showed the Government investment in real infrastructure improvements. Secondly, it showed a Government thinking for the long-term. We both agreed this was a good position from which to capture private sector investment such as from pension funds in our infrastructure.



Teaching in Schools

I spend a lot of my constituency days visiting schools in the constituency and we are generally very lucky and very well served. But there is a great need to ensure that across the country we improve teaching. Nick Gibb, the Minister for Education, agreed with me that we need to allow heads to remove bad teachers and to check on the past performance of new recruits, given that teaching in 4 in 10 schools assessed by Ofsted is rated only as "satisfactory" at best



Our High Streets

Mary Portas's review of our town centres is an important contribution to debate on the future of our high streets whether town or village. During a debate on this subject I was able to point out that the new Neighbourhood Planning reforms I have helped introduce give local communities a much greater say over their town centres than they have ever had.



Keeping interest rates low

In questions to the Chancellor, George Osborne agreed with me that an increase in interest rates at this time would hit businesses with loans and lead to an additional £7 billion of business costs, which would mean some businesses failing and jobs being lost. It is all the more reason why we must maintain our fiscal credibility and it is why international organisations are backing what we have done.

Supporting the Constituency

Thame Neighbourhood Plan Ministerial Visit



On Wednesday 25 January Greg Clark MP, the Minister responsible for planning, visited Thame with me to hear from those involved in producing the town's Neighbourhood Plan. Thame is one of the trail-blazers in Neighbourhood Planning. Participants in the planning process spoke warmly of their experience of helping to put the plan together and of the benefits the plan will bring allowing local residents a real say in helping to shape their own town. They also provided valuable feedback on some of the practical issues which have arisen. The Minister asked me if what I had heard fulfilled my expectations of Neighbourhood Planning when I first developed it. Thame's experience certainly does. I was also glad that one of the leading members of the team from our other trail-blazer – Woodcote – was able to join in the meeting.

Olympic Rowing Dinner



Rowing is an important part of this constituency's history and culture. I was therefore very pleased to be invited to the dinner to celebrate the enormous success of 2011 and to give the GB Olympic Rowing Team a proper send-off as they prepare to defend their Olympic medal reputation.

Local pubs



Over the past few months I have met managers and owners of pubs across the constituency. Nationally, the end of 2011 saw 16 pub closures a week. We have not been immune from this and sadly the Lamb at Satwell was one of those closures. It is not all bad news. The Crown at Playhatch near Reading has closed for a complete redevelopment and will reopen in late February, while The White Hart at Nettlebed is opening seven new bedrooms. There's no silver bullet to halt the decline. Part of the problem is simply a change in the market which now sees pubs making more out of food than out of drink. In our villages, of course, pubs play a crucial role as a community hub. Many are trying to bring real innovation into what they offer and how they do it. The Government is doing all it can to help cut red tape around pubs but the industry's wish for a cut of VAT to 5% is largely unrealistic in these tough economic times. I am though interested in how communities can get involved more in their pubs as has successfully happened in Sydenham and would be grateful for any examples of experience in this.

To find out more about John's work visit his website at www.johnhowellmp.com

If you would like more information about what the Conservative Party is doing locally please visit www.oxfordshireconservatives.com

Promoted by Kevin Thorpe on behalf of John Howell MP both of 8 Gorwell, Watlington, Oxfordshire, OX49 5QE

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