

VIEW FROM THE HOUSE

Following Save Our Libraries Day on 5th February, Mr Speaker Bercow granted my request for an adjournment debate in the Chamber on library services in Walsall South. So on the 28th February I had an opportunity to talk about the fantastic resource that is our public libraries. With Tracy Emin watching from the Gallery, the Minister Ed Vaizey responded.

Even though it has been announced that no Walsall libraries will close this coming financial year, I think it is important to make sure that proper consultations are carried out with the people, families and children who make use of the libraries.

During his response, the Minister referred to the New Art Gallery in Walsall, praising its 'outstanding collection' and describing Walsall as somewhere that 'takes its culture very seriously'. I am a great admirer of the New Art Gallery and was dismayed to hear that it will now be closed on Sundays and Bank Holidays; the two days when most people, particularly families, visit museums and galleries.

So I have written to the Minister to ask if he thinks that closing museums at the most convenient visiting times is taking culture seriously. My fear is that closing it on the days when it can be most used will lead to a decision that is based on false figures of how much it is visited.

Many constituents have written to me with concerns about the future of support, especially for disabled people set out in the Welfare Reform Bill. Whilst it is difficult to navigate around the current rules and regulations, any streamlining of the rules must be welcome. But the Bill goes too far.

The Bill proposes far-reaching changes to the benefit system, including the introduction of Universal Credit, which will replace many of the other benefits including working tax credit; child tax credit. There will also be changes to Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Child Maintenance.

Several organisations are concerned that the changes will make certain vulnerable groups less well off such as people who have to take prolonged time off work. There are also worries that women will be affected disproportionately.

My Epilepsy and Related Conditions (Education and Health Services) Bill was scheduled for a second reading on March 4th. There was not enough time for it to be heard and has been put off until November 11th. I hope to lobby the Government to take the proposals on board which saves costs and more importantly lives.

Valerie Vaz

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