

View From the House

Many of you will have heard about the eventful day on January 19th in Parliament. Not only was there a debate on Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) brought by the Labour Opposition, but the Health and Social Care Bill was published by the Government after some delay.

The Tory led Government decided to abolish the EMA payments of up to £30 a week. These were made to young people from low-income households, who continue in full-time further education.

They were piloted and introduced by the Labour Government from 1999, and were shown to be effective in enabling disadvantaged young people to choose to continue their education with some financial stability. In Walsall, about 60% of 16-18 year olds in full-time education receive some form of EMA help.

In the two days leading up to the debate, I received almost 40 emails from students, telling me their stories of how higher education has helped them out of a spiral of despair and into new qualifications.

They told me that without EMA, they would not be able to afford the books, bus passes and equipment that they need to complete their courses and enter the job market with good qualifications. One in particular failed his GCSE's but has ended up as student of the year with a distinction because he was helped by Walsall College and EMA.

We need an educated and aspiring workforce, and this can only come from having access to education for all. I voted against the plans to scrap EMA.

In my view cutting EMA does not in the least help the deficit as there will have to be a replacement to support those who cannot afford to stay in higher education. It is vital for the future workforce of this country and for the self esteem of those young people to be skilled.

After the debate and the vote, I presented a petition on the floor of the House against the cutting of EMA. This had been signed by over 400 students at Walsall College.

On the same day, the Government published the Health and Social Care Bill. The second reading debate takes place on 31st January. There will be a considerable impact on the NHS with the introduction of open competition to the health service. Many health organisations and individuals including GPs have raised concerns; not least about issues of the accountability of public money. I will be raising these as the Bill begins its journey through Parliament.

Valerie Vaz MP

30 January 2011