

## **View from the House**

The time leading up to Easter is a time for reflection and after one of renewal. And both the Anglican Church with Archbishop Welby and the Catholic Church with Pope Francis have new leaders of the faith which many expect to indicate some renewal.

With the downgrading of the AAA rating by a credit agency – AAA means the country's "extremely strong capacity to meet financial commitments" – it would have been an opportune moment for the Government to look at some new direction to boost growth. Most of the measures were trailed in the media the day before.

Figures released on Budget Day showed that in Walsall South, 4,322 people were claiming Jobseekers' Allowance. This is 368 more people than at the beginning of this Parliament. Real wages are set to fall by 2.4% over the Parliament. Borrowing is now forecast to be £245bn more than planned at the time of the spending review in October 2010.

Councils are already dealing with a 33% cut in funding from central government. This has already led to reductions in local services. The local government association suggested that removing the unnecessary cap on councils' investment in new housing could have boosted growth.

So the fourth budget of the Coalition Government disappointed because the Chancellor did not have a strategy for growth. Measures such as a cut in VAT or not giving millionaires a tax cut would mean that the most vulnerable would not have to shoulder most of the cuts. The ill thought out "bedroom tax" has left people feeling vulnerable. And Banks still will not lend to small businesses.

Recent figures showed that 28% of children in Walsall South are living in poverty, defined as a family income of 60% or less of median income (just £261 a week). The Children's Society said that currently more than half of all school-age children living in poverty are not getting free school meals. For Walsall South approximately 2,600 children who live in poverty are not getting them. I am backing calls to ensure that all children living in poverty are given a free school meal.

Good news though about the preserved aid budget and congratulations to Walsall College and Walsall Adult College on an outstanding Ofsted inspection. Speaking to Jat Sharma Principal of Walsall College last weekend, he paid tribute to students, staff and all at the College. Investment in education is paying off.

I wish you all a peaceful Easter.

**Valerie Vaz**