

View from the House – 15 April 2015

The House returns this week after the Easter Recess, interrupted this Wednesday by the funeral of the country's first woman Prime Minister. The recall of Parliament for a day last week was unnecessary and not good use of taxpayers' money – nearly £2million.

Recent figures from the National Housing Federation show that an estimated 1,434 households in Walsall South will lose out following the changes to housing benefits, which are effectively a "Bedroom Tax". It is estimated that households with 1 spare room will face a bill of approximately £566 extra a year and those with 2 paying approximately £1,010 extra each year. At a time when wages are frozen for many people, the cost of living is increasing rapidly and benefits are being capped, it is difficult to see how those affected are going to be able to make ends meet.

I have heard conflicting messages from the Government for the reasons for this "tax". On the one hand it relates to under-occupancy of properties but then they say it is to reduce the benefits bill. Having worked hard all their life, Pensioners are quite rightly exempt even though they are the most likely to live in under-occupied properties, which suggests the "Bedroom Tax" is not about under-occupancy at all.

I raised the case of foster carers in the House who will lose 14% of their housing benefit if they are fostering one child who has their own room, and 24% if they are fostering two or more children with their own room. Incredibly, fostered children do not count as part of a household for benefit purposes.

The Gala Baths houses the only brine pool in the West Midlands. This resource is valued by many of you especially those put off by the unpleasant effects of chlorine, making the brine pool a vital amenity.

Many of you are worried about the brine pool closing. When I raised this with the Council I was told that the Council is currently reviewing Sports and Leisure Services but no decision has yet been taken on the future of the Pool.

The Gala Baths are of substantial benefit particularly for those who are elderly or disabled. The health benefits of low impact exercise are well documented. With Ellie Simmons a Walsall resident, who medalled in the Paralympics, it would be absurd to close any swimming pool in Walsall and undermine the legacy of London 2012.

Valerie Vaz MP