

## View from the House

May I firstly wish you all a successful and prosperous 2014. Let us not forget that in the closing stages of last year there were difficult times for many people with storms, flooding and some did not have electricity on Christmas Day.

In my last column, a sentence about the Gala Baths elicited a rebuke from the Council. I relied on the fact that in September 2013, Walsall MBC resolved unanimously to call for a detailed report into how an investment of around £1 million into the Gala Baths might secure its future for a further 10 years.

I was told the report to Council will include details of refurbishment works that **might** be done if £1m were to be made available. Why have a report on how to spend £1million if you are not going to spend it? Is the Council renegeing on its commitments or just playing games so that they can make an announcement in February just before the local elections that they will be spending money on the Baths. This is a waste of our money if nothing will come out of it.

After all, the Leader of the Council, Cllr Mike Bird has said "At no time has anybody said that the Gala Baths will close. It is a myth." So are they just messing with us? It seems pretty clear from those pronouncements that there was committed expenditure on keeping the Gala Baths. If the Council is not now committed to the Baths' future, we will have to start the campaign again.

At one of my surgeries, a constituent raised the issue of the use of higher rate numbers 0845 0844 and 0843 by Government Departments. I tabled written questions on the use of these numbers to all the Departments, and published a report from their answers. The Department of Works and Pensions is the worst offender. Those who are most vulnerable and on low incomes have been penalised. I found that the Primary Benefits Inquiries line used the 0845 number and had over 30 million calls; 4 million people rang on the higher rate line to find out about DLA, and Debt recovery had over 1 million inquiries. I have called on the Government to end the use of these lines immediately.

And finally, my constituency office has moved across the road: 16A Lichfield Street, Walsall, WS1 1TJ. The telephone number remains the same on 01922 635835.

**Valerie Vaz MP**

**5 January 2014.**