January 2024 NEWSLETTER

Linlithgow & East Falkirk Constituency

Welcome

Happy New Year! It has been a busy start to 2024, between Parliamentary business and campaigning for the upcoming General Election. Westminster cuts are front and centre of the SNP campaign as we face “no choice” between the damaging cuts and policies of both the Tories and Labour. Read on for just one example. Recent admissions that a Labour government would not tax the super-rich to enable a redistribution of wealth is equally shameful. It is clear the SNP is the only party standing up for Scotland's values and interests. # YES

Westminster Update

Two child benefit cap

Research shows the punitive two-child limit to benefit payments, introduced by this Tory government in 2017, affects one in ten households. That is 1.5 million children. The University of York and Nuffield Trust report states that the two-child limit, along with the benefit cap, have contributed to the rising levels of child poverty; and that they are poverty-producing policies. Data from the House of Commons Library shows that if the cap was removed it would lift 270,000 households out of poverty at a cost of £1.4 billion - far less than the £5 billion that the UKG claim. The current UKG has overseen a huge increase in child poverty since 2010; with a majority of children living in poverty within households where at least one adult is in work. Sir Keir Starmer’s admission, *"We're not changing that policy",* left the SNP as the only major party in Westminster opposing it. The End Child Poverty Coalition is calling on all political parties to scrap the two-child limit, saying “… if political parties do want to tackle child poverty - scrapping this policy is absolutely essential.”

I have reached out to the End Child Poverty Coalition, offering to discuss this matter and work together on areas of natural alignment. I have also supported cross-party Early Day Motions, most recently co-sponsoring “Two child benefit cap” that strongly opposes the continuation of the unnecessary and cruel two-child limit.

Within its financial constraints, the Scottish Government is doing all it can to support as many people as possible. A very recent report highlights Scotland's “much lower” child poverty rate of 24% compared to 31% in England and 28% in Wales, attributing this “at least in part” to the Scottish Child Payment. But 24% is still too high.

Our First Minister, Humza Yousaf MSP, has invited Sir Keir to Bute House, to discuss a range of matters: “… first and foremost the fight against poverty”; including “… that the two-child limit and associated ‘rape clause’ should be repealed.” A Labour government that fails to overturn damaging Tory policy is just as bad as a Tory government.

Foster Carers: Allowances and Tax Arrangements

On a similar issue about the financial wellbeing of children, I led another debate for the Petitions Committee this month, which raised the current monetary pressures on foster carers across the UK. Apart from the widespread impact of the cost-of-living crisis, this undoubtedly relates to the significant inconsistencies that exist in the payment of foster care allowances. That manifests in some children not being given the opportunities they need to recover from the upheavals and traumas they have experienced. Indeed, a child placed with a foster family can benefit from an additional allowance in one local authority (for example, for an initial stock of clothing), whilst another child in exactly the same situation in a neighbouring local authority — does not. It’s a classic example of an unfair postcode lottery. You can read the full debate here: https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-01-15/debates/69D801F2-9C8D-4ABA-B0D6-5B9B8760C548/details

The Parliament Politics Magazine also picked up on this important issue and requested an article, which it ran as a main feature: https://parliamentnews.co.uk/the-foster-care-system-is-a-classic-example-of-an-extremely-unfair-postcode-lottery-we-must-do-better. I hope to progress discussions that focus on the issues raised in the debate that face foster and kinship carers, which are affecting recruitment into, and retention within, the fostering community.

Active in the Constituency

Cost-of-living Event

The Westminster-made cost-of-living crisis continues to hammer households right across Scotland. You might remember that my team organised two excellent Cost-of-living Events for my constituents in November 2022. As there is, unfortunately, no sign of this ongoing crisis ending anytime soon, they have organised a further Event that is taking place this coming Friday. If possible, don't miss out on this great opportunity to access free advice and support from a multitude of local and national organisations about things like energy, benefits, debt, and food insecurity. If you can't attend but feel you could benefit from some advice, please do not hesitate to contact me or my team; or make an appointment at one of my regular surgeries.

This is a drop-in event so you can pop in for 10 minutes if you have a quick inquiry, or stay for as long as necessary to make sure you get all the advice and support you need.

Even if you don't need help yourself, still spread the word to as many people as you can to ensure that no one misses out on any help that is available and that they might need.

Links between Parliament and the Constituency

Public Petitions … continued

Since my update in November I have continued to present petitions about issues that directly affect my constituents. In December I raised that unpaid carers face significant financial challenges in this cost of living crisis, with research from Carers UK finding thousands of unpaid carers being forced into poverty and many cutting back on essentials, including food and heating. I urged the UKG to consider how the benefits system could better support unpaid carers of both working and state pension age; and to review Carers Allowance eligibility, so that carers can live a life beyond their unpaid caring roles and continue to care safely.

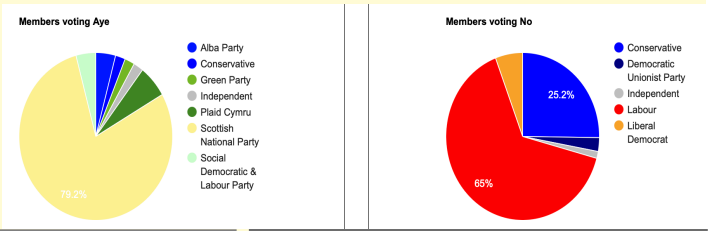
I also raised frozen British pensions, because half a million British citizens around the world receive no uprating due to the UKG failing to establish bilateral agreements. It is time this injustice was remedied to reflect respect and courtesy for both British citizens and our Commonwealth neighbours - such as Canada that has been refused negotiations on this policy four times between 2013 and 2022.

This month I have raised that more and more people are turning to unregulated "Buy Now, Pay Later" products to help them survive the cost-of-living crisis, with resulting serious and unmanageable levels of debt. Regulation of this sector should be implemented urgently to prevent more people becoming victims of unscrupulous lenders.

Finally, I raised the contentious issue of high standing charges on energy bills. These are a significant burden on household finances, with Scottish households bearing some of the highest electricity standing charges across the UK. Residents of Linlithgow & East Falkirk currently pay daily charges of 62.1p on direct debit, and 69.2p on standard credit. Standing charges are especially harsh on low energy users who save proportionally less by reducing usage. They should be abolished to alleviate the financial pressures on households during this cost of living crisis.

Scottish Self-Determination Bill

On 16th January, Neale Hanvey, MP for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, presented a ten-minute rule bill "Scotland (Self-Determination)". This aimed to secure the right to a referendum on independence every 7 years, which would align with Northern Ireland's current practice. It received cross-party support - including from one Tory MP - but not from any in the Labour benches. Indeed, more Labour MPs opposed it than Tories! So, we can add no choice over Scotland's future to the clear dividing line between the SNP and the Tory-Labour Westminster establishment at the upcoming General Election. # YES



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