

# ALISON SEABECK – MP FOR PLYMOUTH MOOR VIEW



Our Ref: SIJ/GCWS01001

Your Ref:

## HOUSE OF COMMONS

04 September 2014

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Dear Katey

### Re: Scrutiny of Problem Debt

Thank you for your recent email inviting me to the problem debt review on 15<sup>th</sup> October. Unfortunately, I have parliamentary duties on that day which I cannot rearrange. I do however welcome the opportunity to share my own thoughts and observations with the panel, as I am deeply concerned about the level of personal debt in the City.

### The Cause

My constituency office post bag is predominantly laden with housing and benefit related problems, so we are picking up why and how someone got into financial difficulties.

The bedroom tax is certainly one which is impacting on families who are already struggling on a low income or who have a disabled person living with them.

The delays benefit claimants are now experiencing with their claims for Personal Independence Payments (former DLA) are hitting people very hard indeed. Most claimants who have contacted me have been waiting six months or more for an assessment. From the time of the assessment to the point of decision-making, claimants are being told it could take up to 26 weeks. In effect, some have therefore been waiting for a year to get a decision. In the meantime, they get nothing.

The level of private rent is another reason we are picking up. Whilst many private landlords are very decent and fair, some do charge extortionate rent. The lack of affordable housing plays, in my view, a very big role in the level of debt we are seeing. Linked to this is the issue of fuel poverty. Many properties, social and private, in my constituency are badly insulated, suffer from damp and draft and antiquated, inefficient heating. Some housing associations are finding it difficult to raise funds for the level of repairs needed and are considering demolition and new-builds instead, negotiating with the HCA, but this doesn't happen overnight and in the meantime I have constituents, particularly in the Barne Barton area, complaining about being unable to stay warm in their properties and having excessive heating costs.

There is a growing call from all social groups to improve financial education, particularly for young people. The Youth Parliament have approached me some time ago asking for this to be one of five 'new' subjects to be included in the mandatory curriculum at schools. I know some schools are already doing a fantastic job but I am happy to continue to campaign on this.

### Understanding the Local Impact

Debt and financial difficulties very often cause a snowball effect and lead to a range of other problems. We are seeing many people diagnosed with stress, anxiety and depression – so there is an almost tangible impact on public health, physically and mentally, and on local health providers.



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

We are seeing relationships breaking down as a result. Someone who has lost their job is often in danger of losing their home, too. We also see this impacting on child welfare - the last figure I had was a shocking 25 per cent children in Plymouth living in poverty.

I also strongly presume that we are seeing an impact on local crime levels, although I appreciate this is inconclusive. I allege that people are more likely to commit benefit fraud as a result. Speaking to the police, we have also seen an increase in the theft of food items, which could be a teller.

Quality of Response

Overall, I believe we have a good advice network in Plymouth. My assistant attends meetings with Advice Plymouth to share and exchange experience and information, which is helpful. We also make referrals to Advice Plymouth, who now host Citizens Advice as well as DIAC. In addition, I know that Money Advice are doing a very good job and I also refer constituents to Christians Against Poverty, who are doing a great job in debt advice and consolidation. Plus we have a number of smaller advice organisations like Routeways and the Zone, who are also very helpful. I think, therefore, Plymouth is well equipped to provide advice and assistance but there are often waiting times for those who seek advice, because of the sheer number of people who need it. And it does of course only address the symptoms, but not the cause, which is where I believe much more needs to be done, preventatively.

I have picked up mixed reports on the council's emergency welfare scheme and last year there was some criticism over the council not using all of its DHP funds, leaving approximately £130,000 unused. I do believe this has been addressed.

I hope this information is of some use to you.

Yours sincerely

Alison Seabeck  
MP for Plymouth Moor View

Ms Katey Johns  
Democratic Support Officer  
Democratic and Member Support  
Plymouth City Council  
Civic Centre  
Plymouth  
PL1 2AA