

LIB DEM PRAISE FOR 'FANTASTIC' CHESTERFIELD COLLEGE

14 January 2005

“What a fantastic College!” That was the response of Phil Willis MP, Lib Dem Shadow Secretary of State for Education, after visiting Chesterfield College today.

Phil spent the day at the College with Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield and Lib Dem Member of the prestigious Education & Skills Select Committee in the House of Commons. *(from left to right) Phil Willis MP, member of College staff and Paul Holmes MP at Chesterfield College*

Phil, a former Headteacher said: *“For me, the value of a day like this is to test out our ideas on Education by talking to staff & students to see if our Policies reflect their needs and concerns. This is an impressive college which gets excellent OFSTED Inspection Reports. The staff have a clear educational vision and enthusiasm for their work. The students, from trainee construction workers to university bound designers, were very articulate.”*

Paul Holmes MP said: *“I visit the College regularly and have presented their degree awards a number of times. Today however, I saw some new aspects of the College, from expanding numbers on plumbing courses to an award winning Centre of Vocational Excellence (COVE). The COVE has just had £1/2million of new investment and is educating state of the art Graphic Designers and cutting edge fashion students. Chesterfield and the surrounding areas are fortunate to have such an excellent College under the leadership of its Principal Ian Murray.”*

LIB DEMS REVEAL ½ MILLION HIDDEN UNEMPLOYED

21 January 2005

Independent House of Commons Library research commissioned by the Liberal Democrats reveals that since Labour came to power, the number of economically inactive who are not seeking work and do not want work, has risen by more than 25% to 464,000.

The Government has failed to ask why a rising number of unemployed Britons are not seeking work – they are not students, retired or long term sick. The number of people who are claiming benefits is used by the Government as an official measure of unemployment. This states that there are just 826,300 people out of work in the UK. However, this does not include the 7,860,000 economically inactive people. Across the regions there has been a dramatic rise in the number of these people who do not want work:

Five regions with the fastest growing number of people who are not seeking and do not want work:

Liberal Democrat Shadow Minister for Work, Paul Holmes MP said:

“The Government shouts about how well it is managing employment levels but it turns a blind eye to the hundreds of thousands of people of working age who are not working. The shocking increase since Labour came to power in the number of people who are not working and do not want work, shows that the Government prefers to sweep these people under the carpet than address the problem. This is the group the Government prefer to keep quiet about. There is real concern about what these people are doing as they’re not seeking work and not seeking benefits.”

Opportunities Knocked House of Commons' 'House Magazine', 24 January 2005.

Paul Holmes argues that the New Deal’s failings lie in its inflexibility, lack of imagination, and constant use of stick rather than carrot

With the launch of the first of the New Deal programmes in 1998 Tony Blair pledged “to break a culture where people think there is no hope and they have no prospects in life”. The New Deal has largely failed to achieve its aims. Less than half of New Deal leavers have achieved sustainable employment, and those with the greatest barriers to employment are receiving the least funding.

Numerous reports expose the truth behind the Government’s boast that the New Deal for Young People has got over a quarter of a million under 25’s off benefit and into work. The National Audit Office in 2002

reported, that only around 14% of under 25's found jobs directly because of the New Deal. Most of the other 86% "would have found work anyway because of turnover in the Labour Market and growth in the economy." The Liberal Democrats would refocus the three-quarters of a billion pound annual New Deal budget into support for those who need most help in accessing the job market, rather than on programmes that see the already job ready get into work fairly easily - as they would do anyway when the job market is buoyant. We cannot afford to continue to ignore the plight of those who face the greatest difficulty in gaining work, including the 1.2 million disabled people who want to work. It is unjust to them, and is an appalling waste of the nation's human capital.

The Prime Minister's recent attack on people who "languish on benefits" revealed his failure to understand the reality of life for those trapped by an inflexible benefit system and sidelined by the New Deal. Even a worker on the minimum wage earns more than the highest rate of incapacity benefit leaving little incentive to 'languish'.

A pitiful 3% of the New Deal's budget is spent on supporting disabled people into work – ensuring that the most needy receive the least help. This makes little economic sense considering that the cost of benefits for disabled people is in the region of £23 billion compared to £10 billion for non-disabled people. Over the last year organisations such as Shaw Trust, Groundwork Trust and Employment Opportunities were so successful in getting people off incapacity benefit and into work, that the Government instructed them to slow down because they were exceeding their budgets. This shows that the 'carrot' of help is much more successful than the Gradgrind stick of threats and sanctions.

The Liberal Democrats would develop a more flexible and intensive programme to help those experiencing severe difficulties gaining employment, particularly disabled people, lone parents, ethnic minorities and the over-50s. Individual Work Scheme advisers would maintain links with those jobseekers who are hardest to help, to support them during their first few months of employment.

The rigidity of the present system is a disincentive for disabled people looking to return to work. Under the Labour Government an individual must work a minimum of 16 hours per week in order to qualify for Disabled Person's Tax Credit. For many disabled people it is hugely difficult to meet this requirement, due to the fluctuating nature of many disabilities, and the fatigue from which many disabled people suffer.

The Liberal Democrats would investigate the feasibility of introducing a partial capacity benefit. The flexibility of this benefit would enable and encourage disabled people to do varying amounts of paid work without fear of becoming ineligible for benefits.

The proposed expansion of the successful Pathways to Work scheme, which offers the unemployed help and support, presents a welcome departure from the 'big stick' approach that has so far dominated New Labour's welfare reform. Successive reports published by the Department for Work and Pensions itself have shown the negative impact of benefit sanctions, with a recent University College of London study demonstrating a link between claimants disappearing from the register due to sanctions and a 2-3% increase in crime. Favouring 'the carrot', the Liberal Democrats would replace the New Deal's sanctions with incentives that encourage participants to abide by employment schemes, as has already been shown by work in some Employment Zone experiments.

When Blair promised to 'break' a culture characterised by lack of opportunity, he embarked upon an aggressive and ineffective welfare policy reminiscent of the disastrous 1834 Poor Law. Blaming the 'undeserving poor' and the 'feckless unemployed' for the reality of economic cycles, structural economic change and the 'barriers' of disability was a Victorian mistake that both Thatcher and New Labour were wrong to copy.

GAPING HOLE IN INCAPACITY BENEFIT REFORM PLANS

2 February 2005

Paul Holmes MP for Chesterfield and Shadow Minister for Work and Disability, has exposed a gaping hole in the Government's plans to 'reform' Incapacity Benefit announced today.

Questioning Alan Johnson during his Statement to Parliament this afternoon, Paul pointed out that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made great play in his speech on the importance of the Pathways to Work programme in helping and supporting people with disabilities back into work. Paul agreed that the first pilots - as in his constituency of Chesterfield - had shown that "help, support and incentives worked where threats and sanctions did not."

The Secretary of State had told Parliament that " ...when we have the extra support of Pathways in place, we will implement a radically reformed Incapacity Benefit... our goal is to have the main elements in place by 2008."

Alan Johnson admitted to Paul however that only one third of the country would have the Pathways to Work programme by 2008 but that the new IB system would be imposed on the whole country at that date - including the two thirds of claimants who would not have the support of the Pathways scheme. Commenting afterwards Paul said, "As usual the devil is in the detail and the 'warm words' and promises in the Statement begin to unravel when the detail is scrutinised."

CHESTERFIELD MP ON 'CARE FOR THE DYING' FACT-FINDING MISSION 3 February 2005

Care for the dying in Chesterfield is being put under the spotlight by local MP Paul Holmes.

In addition to supporting a recent Commons Early Day Motion in support of Marie Curie Cancer Care's *Supporting the Choice to Die at Home* campaign, Paul Holmes has written to the Chair of the Chesterfield Primary Care Trust, to outline in detail how she and the PCT will meet the needs of the terminally ill and their families.

In his fact finding letter, Paul Holmes MP asks for details of:

Services currently in place to support the care of the terminally ill;

How services facilitate choice of place of death now, as well as plans for the future;

The number of terminally ill patients cared for over the past year, where they died and the details of organizations who supported this care.

Paul Holmes MP said:

"The issue of choice around place of death and the provision of palliative care services to all those who need it – irrespective of diagnosis – is one of the major challenges which faces us in healthcare today. It is shocking to learn that more than half of all cancer patients die in hospital when research by Marie Curie Cancer Care shows that most people in the UK would rather be cared for at home. For every £1 spent providing care for the dying in the community, around £2 is freed up back in hospitals.

Being allowed to die with dignity, in the comfortable surroundings of your own home, is a choice that terminally ill patients must be allowed to make for themselves."

HOLMES - PENSION CREDIT TAKE UP GRINDING TO A HALT 05 February 2005

Local Lib Dem MP, Paul Holmes, has discovered that there are likely to be in the region of 2,178 households in Chesterfield eligible for the new Pension Credit but not receiving it.

Paul said: *"The Labour Government should be ashamed that so many of this country's poorest pensioners are still living so far beneath the poverty line.*

Things have gone from bad to worse with the new Pension Credit. These figures show that our worst fears are being realised - large numbers of vulnerable pensioners are set to miss out on the help they desperately need. The only guaranteed way to ensure that pensioners have dignity and security in old age is through a decent state pension, payable as of right. That is why Liberal Democrats would guarantee £100 a month more on the pension at 75, over £130 a month for couples over 75, lifting a million pensioners out of means-testing at a stroke."

Pension Credit is an entitlement for people aged 60 or over living in Great Britain.

It should guarantee everyone aged 60 and over an income of at least £105.45 for single pensioners and £160.95 a week for pensioner couples. You can apply for Pension Credit by calling the free phone

Pension Credit application line on 0800 99 1234, textphone 0800 169 0133. Lines are open between 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 1pm on Saturdays.

BLIGHTED BY CHILD POVERTY 18 Feb 2005

Paul Holmes MP for Chesterfield addresses a seminar to highlight the shocking number of children living in poverty in the East Midlands. **According to the latest figures, 260,000 of the one million children in the East Midlands are living in poverty – that’s 29% of children in the region.**

Paul said: “Britain is the world’s fourth largest economy and yet it has the one of the highest rates of child poverty in the industrial world. 3.6 million British children – one in every three – live in poverty. In one area of Chesterfield – Middlescroft and Poolsbrook – more than 40% of children are living in households that are surviving on benefits. Child poverty has severe and far-reaching consequences. Children born into poverty are more likely to die in childhood, live in poor housing, leave school with fewer qualifications and be unemployed in adulthood. It is only by tackling poverty now, that we will be able to improve the lives of the next generation of children.”

AST MIDLANDS BLIGHTED BY CHILD POVERTY – HOLMES

18 February 2005

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“Britain is the world’s fourth largest economy and yet it has the one of the highest rates of child poverty in the industrial world. 3.6 million British children – one in every three – live in poverty.

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“Child poverty has severe and far-reaching consequences. Children born into poverty are more likely to die in childhood, live in poor housing, leave school with fewer qualifications and be unemployed in adulthood.

“It is only by tackling poverty now, that we will be able to improve the lives of the next generation of children.”

Paul Holmes MP’s speech: *The Way Forward*

Britain is the world’s fourth largest economy and yet it has the one of the highest rates of child poverty in the industrial world. 3.6 million British children – one in every three – live in poverty. That’s three times the number below the poverty line in 1970.

This grim national picture is reflected in the East Midlands where 260,000 children live in poverty – that’s 29% of our children in the region. Take a closer look and in many areas the situation is even more desperate.

In one area of my Chesterfield constituency – Middlescroft and Poolsbrook – poverty blights the lives of more than 40% of children. In three other wards in Chesterfield ie. Ruther, Dunston and St Helens, the proportion of households with children surviving on benefits ranges between 31.4% to 38%. In other areas of the East Midlands the proportion of children living in such households is far, far higher – reaching 56% in Arboretum in Nottingham. I’m sure that many of my constituents would be equally shocked and horrified to learn of the prevalence of poverty within our community.

Our failure to appreciate the severity of this problem in Britain makes it even harder to address. Much of Britain's poverty is hidden - nearly half the children living in poverty are outside the most deprived areas. But child poverty is also driven behind closed doors by stigma, isolation and embarrassment.

I welcome the opportunity to join End Child Poverty today to open these doors and raise awareness of the shameful disparity that exists within our country.

The consequences of child poverty are severe and far-reaching.

Children born into poverty are more likely to die in the first year of life, are more likely to die of childhood accidents, and will live shorter lives than children born to wealthier families. A boy in Manchester can expect to live seven years less than a boy in Barnet.

Children born into poverty are more likely to live in cramped homes with damp problems and lack of heating; in the UK, more than 900,000 families with children live in poor housing. Since 1997 the number of households living in temporary accommodation has more than doubled. This has a negative impact on both health and education. A 2003 Shelter survey found that children had missed an average of 55 school days due to the disruption of moves into and between temporary accommodation – that's the equivalent of one whole term a year. And poor children are at increased risk of homelessness as adults.

Children born into poverty are more likely to leave school at 16 with fewer qualifications. By the age of six a less able child from a rich family is likely to have overtaken an able child born into a poor family. And poor children are much more likely to be excluded from social activities like school trips and leisure services.

Poor *children* are likely to grow up to be poor *adults*. They are at a greater risk of unemployment and low pay when they grow up. If a poor child leaves school without *any* qualifications, they are three times less likely to receive job-related training.

Children born into poverty are more likely to be teenage parents. And their children are more likely to live in poverty. And so the cycle continues...

It is only by tackling poverty now, that we will be able to improve the lives of the next generation of children.

Poverty in Britain exists not because it is a poor country, but because it is an unequal country. Britain is now twice as unequal as it was in 1977, and the gap between rich and poor grew markedly during the 1990s. The bottom 10% of the population get just three per cent of the income, while the top ten per cent get more than a quarter. To end child poverty we must tackle inequality.

In 1999 Tony Blair pledged to end child poverty in Britain within a generation. Gordon Brown rightly called child poverty 'a scar on the soul of Britain' – but is the Government doing enough?

It has indeed been making some progress. The Institute for Fiscal Studies points out that real spending on child support through tax and benefits systems has increased by 50% since Labour came to power. Reforms of tax and benefits has already managed to lift one million children out of poverty - and the Liberal Democrats congratulate them for that.

But urgent action is needed if the Government is going to meet its target of eradicating child poverty by 2020.

Last year the Work and Pensions Select Committee published a report into Child Poverty in the UK. To meet the Government's interim target of halving child poverty by 2010 the Committee suggested that the poorest

families need an extra £10 per week, per child. The Government's policy so far has concentrated on taking children who are nearest the poverty line out of poverty but is failing to reach those children living in severe and persistent poverty. The Committee recommended that the Government sets out a road map towards meeting this goal.

The Government's response to the report was, at best, vague. It is summed up by their conclusion:

"This is a useful contribution to an important debate and the Government looks forward to further engagement with the Committee on the issue."

So what could the Government be doing better?

The Government's rhetoric is all about getting people into work as *the* route out of poverty.

But what about those children in poverty whose families aren't in work and may not feasibly be going to get into work? Or those children in families who are struggling because, for example, they or their child has a disability, or they are living in temporary accommodation? Or the children of asylum seekers who are not *allowed* to work? The Government's 'talk' of alleviating poverty among 'hard working families' is not helping to lift the most vulnerable children in our society out of poverty.

The Government's New Deal programmes have largely failed to achieve their aims of supporting people off benefits and into work. Barely 30% of those starting the two compulsory New Deals have entered sustained jobs since the scheme was introduced. Those with the greatest barriers to employment are receiving the least funding - just 5% of the New Deal budget is currently spent on supporting disabled people into work.

There are 2.1 million disabled parents, half of whom are jobless. In 2002/03 39% of children living with at least one disabled adult were estimated to live in poverty and the figure could well be much higher. The Government has failed to introduce a policy that addresses the particular difficulties faced by disabled parents. The expansion of the Pathways to Work Scheme to a third of the country with its £40 a week Return to Work credit is a welcome step in the right direction, but does not go far enough.

The Liberal Democrats advocate an individualised approach to getting people back to work. We would refocus the £791 million of New Deal money into support for those who need most help in accessing the job market via 'Individual Work Schemes'. Individual Work Scheme advisers would create links with local employers to ensure that jobseekers are meeting local skills needs. We would also use local private and voluntary sector expertise to help the jobseekers who are farthest from the labour market.

The Liberal Democrats would develop a more flexible and intensive programme to help those experiencing severe difficulties gaining employment, particularly disabled people, lone parents, ethnic minorities and the over-50s. The Individual Work Scheme advisers would maintain links with those jobseekers who are hardest to help, to support them during their first few months of employment.

Increased employment requires accessible, affordable childcare. Many parents of a disabled child would like to work, but cannot because of the availability and cost of suitable childcare. The Government currently provides £25 million a year to local authorities to help meet the additional costs of childcare for disabled children, which is clearly insufficient.

The Liberal Democrats would implement key elements of the 10 Year Childcare Strategy. We would roll out 3500 children's centres by 2010, providing integrated childcare, early education and family services to the under 5's. Children in isolated rural areas would particularly benefit. We would also extend free part-time early education places for three and four year-olds to four hours a day for 38 weeks of the year and increase the flexibility for parents to use these hours.

But we must also bear in mind that work does not necessarily lift families out of poverty.

The majority of poor children (52%) live in a household where at least one adult works. The number of low paid jobs has doubled since 1977 to over 6 million people, representing a fifth of the workforce.

Furthermore, it is not necessarily in the best interests of the child for a parent to be in work. Government must consider measures that do not drive parents back to work against their will. The Liberal Democrats would scrap targets that aim to get 70% of lone parents into work, regardless of their family situations.

We believe that reform of the tax and benefits system should be a top priority.

So far Government policy has concentrated on taking children who are nearest the poverty line out of poverty. Reforming the Social Fund is vital to alleviating poverty among those in severe and persistent poverty. The latest Social Fund report (03/04) shows that three quarters of a million people on income support are having more than £11 a week deducted from their benefit to pay back a loan.

The Government's introduction of tax credits has been a shambles. The Treasury Select Committee reported at the end of July that 400,000 applicants had received their first payment late, and by the end of November, the Inland Revenue had paid more than 330,000 interim payments. These delays caused a huge impact on families and may cause further difficulties when additional payments paid out in 2003-04 are deducted in 2004-05.

The Liberal Democrats would reform the Child and Working Tax Credit system, to improve the system of financial support for parents, by allocating Child and Working Tax Credits as a fixed-term award for at least 6 months. This would simplify the system, ensuring that parents know exactly how much money to expect for a fixed length of time and stop minor/temporary changes in circumstance leading to a change in entitlements. The application process would be simplified for initial application and reassessment.

The Liberal Democrats would also give families more security by scrapping the fundamentally unfair Council Tax, which places a severe financial burden on many low-income families. Under the council tax system, the poorest 10% pay over 4 times more of their income than the richest 10%. We would replace it with a Local Income Tax, which is based on people's ability to pay – so that no one pays more than they can afford.

Tackling child poverty is a complex task. End Child Poverty's ten policies for taking one million children out of poverty by 2010 provides policy makers with valuable guidance. I have only been able to touch the surface of some of the problems that contribute to child poverty in Britain today and some of the ways in which we may solve them, but this is not a subject from which I/the Liberal Democrats will turn away.

If Britain's inequality were restored to 1983 levels, some 7,500 deaths of people younger than 65 could be prevented – and if child poverty were eradicated, an estimated 1,400 lives per year would be saved among children under fifteen. We must be bold in making the changes that will end child poverty. This is not a problem on which the Liberal Democrats are willing to close the door.

AN ONLINE CONSULTATION ON TAX CREDIT OVERPAYMENTS 22 February 2005

Paul Holmes MP is calling on constituents who have faced problems with tax credit overpayments to report their experiences to an independent advice network collecting evidence on the problems people are facing. The online consultation is being run by Adviceni – an independent advice network based in Northern Ireland. They are seeking the views of tax credit recipients from all over the UK.

Paul Holmes MP said :“The Government's continued inability to pay families the money they are owed is breathtaking. Many local families have contacted me because they are being left out of pocket without the means for everyday living. The introduction of the new tax credits has pushed millions of families onto a

roller coaster of late payments, overpayment, claw back of payments and reassessments. It is time the Government looked at simplifying the system and ended the misery of the hundreds of thousands of families caught in a bureaucratic nightmare. The more evidence that can be gathered about the problems for ordinary hard working families the better. For anyone who has internet access, I recommend using the opportunity of highlighting your experiences in this way.”

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS UNVEIL ALTERNATIVE BUDGET 28 Feb 2005

The Liberal Democrats will fund the provision of 10,000 more police on the streets and an extra £25 more on the pension every week for the over 75s, in their ‘Alternative Budget’ today.

The Liberal Democrats have identified over five billion pounds a year where low priority spending can be reallocated to our priority areas such as pensions, policing, health and education.

At the launch Liberal Democrat Leader, Charles Kennedy MP emphasised the need for fairer taxation and tough choices in public spending: *“We have a reputation for being straightforward on tax. The difference between the parties on tax take is minimal - the real issue will be one of principle and of priority. In principle it is important that the tax burden does not fall disproportionately on the poor and vulnerable.”*

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield said:

“Our tax system currently reinforces rather than alleviates inequality. The poorest 20% pay a higher percentage of their income in tax than the top 20%. People don’t want to pay more tax but they want it distributed more fairly.

“That is why we advocate scrapping Council Tax and replacing it with Local Income Tax. The majority of households will benefit or face no change under our system. That is also why we are lifting over 400,000 home-buyers, largely first time buyers, out of paying Stamp Duty. To enable us to abolish tuition fees and top-up fees, introduce free personal care for the elderly and cut local taxation we have also proposed a 50% tax ceiling on every pound earned over £100,000.”

CHESTERFIELD MP BACKS INVESTIGATION INTO HEALTH GAP 28 Feb 2005

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, has today committed his support to a major legal investigation by the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) into primary healthcare for people with learning disabilities and people with mental health problems.

Evidence shows that these people are amongst the poorest groups in society, die younger of preventable diseases than the rest of the population and miss out on life-saving screening programmes. Studies have found that:

preventable deaths for people with learning disabilities are 4 times higher than for the rest of the population
people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia live on average 9 years less than other people

people with a learning disability are 58 times more likely to die before the age of 50 than the general population
Diabetes is four to five times more common among people with a severe mental health problem

Paul Holmes MP said: “I welcome this vital investigation. We need to find out what causes these unequal health outcomes. It is a complex issue but one which urgently needs to be researched. I urge people to get in touch with the DRC to tell them about their experiences.”

LOCAL RAIL DELAYS SOAR UNDER LABOUR 2 March 2005

Delays on Midland Mainline services are three times as common since Labour came to power, new analysis by the Liberal Democrats shows.

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield says:

"These figures will come as no surprise to long-suffering local rail passengers. Conservative privatisation left the railways in a mess, but Labour hasn't solved the problems. In fact they've got worse. "When Labour came to power in 1997 8.7% of Midland Mainline services arrived late. Now it is an astonishing 25.7% - more than a quarter of all services!"

Across Britain, rail passengers have lost more than 10,000 years of their lives on delayed trains since Labour came to office. Delays to passengers alone have cost the nation's economy dear, with a figure of around £1 billion over the seven years. Every major network in the country has declined under Labour. Liberal Democrats would get the railways working again. We will streamline the system, with fewer, larger franchises given longer contracts in return for more investment and better services."

LABOUR SELECTION POLICIES HIT SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN HARDEST 2 March 2005

Liberal Democrat Disability Spokesman and member of the Education and Skills Select Committee, Paul Holmes MP, questioned the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP, today over the failure to practise inclusion for children with Special Educational Needs, including disabilities.

"Any analysis of the intake of the schools at the top of the league table shows that they are united in taking fewer children with special educational needs and fewer children who qualify for free school meals than national or local averages indicate they should.

"Such overt or covert selection policies are an inevitable consequence of New Labour policies emphasising choice, choice, choice in a cut-throat free market of competing schools and league tables."

The Disability Rights Commission has found that:

"the system is failing disabled children and young people and that schools are flouting their existing duties with relative impunity... the rhetoric of mainstreaming needs to be followed up by specific action to include disabled children."

Government policies on Admissions are not statutory and the Committee Report on Admissions (July '04) documented the failure of these voluntary admissions codes.

E- UNIVERSITY ANOTHER EXPENSIVE PUBLIC FINANCE FAILURE 2 March 2005

Commenting on the Education Select Committee report into the government's failed e-university project, Liberal Democrat committee member, Paul Holmes MP said:

"Like the Individual Learning Accounts a few years ago, the UK e-university is yet another example of the Government taking taxpayers down a blind alley. "The Government was once again too eager to involve the private sector when there were experienced educational providers within the public sector who could have lent greater expertise to this project at much less financial risk.

"There was no formal market research to establish the demand for the proposed remote learning package and the colleges and the Open University, who currently provide this type of training, were not properly involved.

"Instead, at the height of the dot com boom, the Government wasted millions of pounds of public money on an ill-thought out, poorly planned white elephant. Frankly, taxpayers and people seeking distance learning from the UK's education system deserved better."

MIDLAND MAINLINE FARE RISES 08 March 2005

New figures showing Britain's railways are the most expensive in Europe make this year's inflation-busting rail fares look even more unfair, says Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield. Paul Holmes said:

"Rail passengers traveling on Midland Mainline Rail Company faced increases of around 4% this year. Our rail travelers are being forced to pay today, for a promise of improvements tomorrow. Rail fares have been held down in the past because of poor service. Now commuters are going to have to pay for bad management and years of under-investment, with no guarantees of a better service."

"Britain's railways are already the most expensive in Europe, with research by the Liberal Democrats revealing that £10 will only take passengers 25 miles on the UK railway system. A tenner goes further on most European railways. You can travel more than seven times as far in Italy, and over four times as far in Portugal for the same money. In the Czech Republic you can travel over 10 times as far on the railway as you can in the UK. Yet with this year's fare rises the gap looks like it will widen further still.

"The question that the Government and Midland Mainline Rail Company must answer is, how many years will we see inflation-busting fare rises before our railways are safe, reliable and affordable?"

LOCAL VITAMIN CAMPAIGNERS BACKED BY CHESTERFIELD MP 03 March 2005

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield was praised today for speaking out against new EU regulations that would see thousands of vitamin and mineral supplements banned from July this year.

Local Health campaigners and the lobby group Consumers for Health Choice thanked Paul Holmes today for voting in favour of a cross-party motion in the House of Commons, calling on the government to renegotiate the Food Supplements Directive.

Unfortunately Labour Minister Melanie Johnson introduced an alternative motion congratulating the government on its negotiations and with most Labour MPs whipped into voting with the Government; this motion was lost.

Consumers have been campaigning against the Directive for a number of years and it is fast becoming an election issue. Consumers for Health Choice is determined to keep up the pressure on Government and has called on supplement users to take into account their local MP's position on the Commons motion when deciding how to vote in the upcoming general election. **Paul Holmes MP said:** *"I share your concern over the effect of the directives on the availability of food supplements, which we believe can provide a useful means to good health within a healthy diet. "The Liberal Democrats have raised our concerns both in the European Parliament and at Westminster and continue to fight to maintain the presence of perfectly safe vitamins and minerals in our shops."*

LOCAL PENSIONERS £100 BOOST 10 March 2005

The Liberal Democrats have launched the most generous package for older people on offer from any major political party.

Among other proposals in the Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Older People, 8,534 pensioners in Chesterfield aged over 75 will get more than £100 a month extra on their pension, or more than £140 a month for a pensioner couple.

Chesterfield Liberal Democrat MP Paul Holmes has warmly welcomed the plans, saying: *"It's time that older people were treated with the respect they deserve by politicians. Our carefully costed package is worth nearly £7 billion a year over and above what Labour is currently offering to pensioners - and over £4 billion more than the Conservatives.*

Our proposals will lift the most vulnerable pensioners out of poverty and tackle the scandal where so many women pensioners are not entitled to a basic pension in their own right.

Our plans to scrap Council Tax will benefit eight million pensioners, with six million paying no local tax at all. Pensioners would save far more than under the Conservatives' rebate proposal.

And it is wrong that many elderly people are forced to sell their homes to pay for their care. We will bring in free long-term personal care for the elderly.

Neither of the other parties are offering any of these policies. This will be by far the best deal on offer to pensioners from any party at the coming general election.

The Liberal Democrat message to older citizens is: we understand our debt to you. We have the policies that will deliver you a fair deal in your retirement."

LIB DEMS CHALLENGE PHONE MASTS ON HEALTH GROUNDS 14 March 2005

This Friday 18 March, Liberal Democrat Chief Whip, Andrew Stunell MP will present a bill to Parliament that aims to bring mobile phone masts under strict planning control and bring in the 'precautionary principle', giving extra safeguards for schools, homes, and medical facilities from the risk of excessive radiation. The positioning of mobile phone masts has caused controversy across the country as masts have been put up close to schools, hospitals and residential areas. Local planning authorities do not currently have any powers to block mast applications for masts below 15m and only have limited powers for those above.

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield said:

"The Conservatives did a deal with the phone companies when they were in government to cut planning controls for masts. It is easier to get planning permission for a mast than it is for a porch. This is an alarming situation and needs to be addressed. This bill will allow planning authorities to take account of health concerns and will require the industry to produce more evidence about the radiation emitted, and to justify the need for each mast.

I hope that the bill gains all party support given the unknown and as yet un-researched effects the masts might have on public health."

LABOUR RISKS CHESTERFIELD'S HEALTH 11 March 2005

The Department of Health has announced that from the start of April the cost of an NHS prescription in England is to rise by 10p to £6.50. NHS dentistry charges will also go up, with the maximum cost for a single course of treatment rising to £384.

Commenting on the Labour Government's increased charges for NHS services, Paul Holmes said: *"Charges for dental and eye check-ups discourage people from seeking regular checks. This prevents problems from being identified and dealt with quickly.*

The Liberal Democrats will abolish charges for dental and eye check-ups. We want to see an end to Labour's drill and fill approach to dental treatment. Prescription charges deter many people from seeking medical attention or taking the medicines they have been prescribed.

These charges can be a significant burden on people who need a large number of prescriptions but don't qualify for the existing exemptions. The Liberal Democrats will freeze the level of prescription charges and conduct a much-needed review of exemptions."

BUDGET LITTLE MORE THAN A STICKING PLASTER FOR ELECTION 16

March 2005

Paul Holmes MP for Chesterfield has criticised the Labour Government's Budget as being little more than a sticking plaster applied for the forthcoming election.

Responding to the Budget, Liberal Democrat Leader, Charles Kennedy MP, said: *"We are lucky in this country. Britain has the 4th largest economy in the world. So how can it be right in Britain today that the poorest 20% pay more in tax, as a proportion of their income, than the richest 20%? Over the last eight years the Chancellor has tinkered an awful lot, but he has failed to tackle fundamental unfairness in the system. This budget is just more of the same."*

Commenting on the increase in help for pensioners to pay

Council Tax, Paul Holmes MP said: *"Only the Liberal Democrats plans for scrapping council tax and replacing it with a local income tax, and for the introduction of a citizen's pension will truly benefit pensioners. Under Liberal Democrat plans, 6 million pensioners will not pay local income tax and an average single pensioner will benefit by £209 a year. Our plans for a citizen's pension will lift over a million pensioners out of the degrading means-testing system - an increase of over £100 a month more for single pensioners and over £140 a month for pensioner couples."*

MILLION MANUFACTURING JOBS LOST UNDER LABOUR

16 March 2005

Official government figures released today show that 1 million manufacturing jobs have been lost since Labour won power in May 1997. In the East Midlands 12,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost in the last year alone.

Paul Holmes MP for Chesterfield and Liberal Democrat Shadow Minister for Work, said: *“Only 10% of the working population are now employed by the manufacturing industry compared to 33% forty years ago. While change in the manufacturing sector may well be inevitable, this Government’s neglect of it is not. We cannot afford to ignore this haemorrhaging of jobs when manufacturers contribute £150 billion to our economy and make up a sixth of all British businesses. And by remaining outside the Euro zone Britain will continue to suffer as companies choose to invest within the zone. We cannot compete with low wage economies for bulk manufacturing, but both business and government must invest more in skills training. We must back the development of cutting edge technologies such as those that harness wave, wind and solar power, instead of letting these ideas go abroad.”*

LIB DEMS CALL FOR INCREASED RECYCLING 18 March 2005

Paul Holmes, Liberal Democrat MP for Chesterfield is calling on the Environment Minister to set higher national recycling targets at the forthcoming review of England’s national waste strategy.

According to Government figures, since Labour came to power in 1997, total municipal waste has gone up by 19% and Britain is still bottom of the European recycling league.

Paul Holmes MP said: “In less than two years Chesterfield’s Liberal Democrat Borough Council have more than doubled recycling from 11% under Labour to over 23% in 2005. A green backbone runs through every aspect of Liberal Democrat policy. We will ensure that within seven years all household waste is recycled, and we will aim to offer every household regular kerbside recycling collections. It is high time the Labour Government set national recycling targets that could truly transform Britain into one of the best recyclers in Europe.”

Friends of the Earth have praised the Liberal Democrats’ environment policies: “The Liberal Democrats have long supported a wide range of environmental policies. But we are still recycling just 17% of our waste in England. The amount of household waste we produce has been increasing year on year and our recycling rate falls a long way short of performance in some other European countries.”

Initiative will help to engage people in measures to deal with Climate Change 5 April 2005

The Sustainable Energy Partnership, whose members include all the major environmental organisations, today congratulated local MP, Paul Holmes, for signing House of Commons Early Day Motion No 801. The Motion calls for permitted development status to be given to micro installation of renewable energy devices by individual householders. This would avoid the hassle and cost of having to obtain planning permission – thus encouraging more people to invest in micro energy systems.

At a time when emissions of CO₂ are rising and the government is not on track to meet its targets micro-generation is ‘the new kid on the block’- it would help reduce fuel bills, emissions of CO₂ and it will also engage consumers in averting climate change – the greatest issue facing the world.

Partnership Organiser Ron Bailey said:

“Climate Change sometimes seems so big an issue that there is little that individual consumers can do: but the installation of micro generation units is a step that many people can take. Giving such installations permitted development status will remove hurdles and cut costs. “We therefore congratulate Paul Holmes MP for being in the forefront of current moves to promote micro-generation to reduce climate change.”

SUCCESS! – PROTECTION WON FOR FORMER MINERS

22 March 2005

Speaking today in a parliamentary debate Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, called on the Government to take action to control or regulate claims handling companies.

Paul told the Constitutional Affairs Minister, David Lammy MP:

“Some claims handling companies advertise and cold-call on former miners and their families, including Chesterfield constituents. The companies mislead vulnerable people into allowing them to handle their claims for health compensation for illnesses such as pneumoconiosis. They are now turning their attention to Asbestos related claimants. These disgraceful companies then sell the claims in bulk to solicitors and sometimes charge a fee to the claimant as well. This is the most outrageous example of legalised robbery I’ve ever seen. Solicitors are paid by the Government to handle these cases. Claimants should go straight to reputable solicitors and not use claims handling companies at all.”

Paul was delighted to hear the Minister respond 20 minutes later by announcing that the Government would legislate to deal with these abuses by claims handling companies. If anyone in Chesterfield has been taken in by one of these companies, please contact Paul Holmes MP’s office (see top of page)

SMALL FIRMS IN CHESTERFIELD TO BENEFIT FROM LIBERAL DEMOCRAT PLANS

22 March 2005

Around a thousand businesses in Chesterfield would save more than £600 a year on their annual rates bill under proposals unveiled from the Liberal Democrats.

Welcoming the launch of the Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Business, Paul Holmes, Liberal Democrat MP for Chesterfield, said: *“This is great news for local small firms, who are getting a raw deal from the Labour Government. Small businesses currently pay much more of their turnover in business rates than larger companies. This is just not fair. The Liberal Democrats will introduce a Business Rates Allowance that will deliver relief on business rates for smaller businesses, saving them, on average, over £600 a year.*

“We will also slash the red tape, bureaucracy and over-regulation that are holding local businesses back. No new regulation will be passed until there is a full published assessment of its costs and necessity. Instead of bureaucratic central government business support schemes we will provide businesses with advice and support accessible on the ground where they operate.

“And we will equip school leavers with the kind of skills local employers really need. From the age of 14 we will give pupils greater choice on how they continue their education, including the option of taking up an apprenticeship or other accredited workplace training scheme.”

NATIONAL GROUP HAILS “LOCAL HERO HOLMES” 7 April 2005

Chesterfield’s Liberal Democrat MP Paul Holmes is getting a helping hand from an unexpected source. A national group called Vote 4 Peace is hailing Holmes as a “local hero” for opposing the Iraq war in Parliament. Vote 4 Peace is a non-party campaign backing forty anti-Iraq war MPs and candidates in the election with money and supporters from around Britain.

“We’ve chosen Paul Holmes because he had the guts to stand up for what he believes in,” says Adrian Bannister, of Vote 4 Peace. ***If re-elected to represent Chesterfield, Paul will vote against Britain blindly following George W Bush into further unwise military adventures in***

the Middle East. He also happens to be a first rate local MP, and someone who knows his town and is proud of it."

Vote 4 Peace was founded last year by an all-party group who say their aim is to have a majority of MPs in the next Parliament pledged to vote against participating in an American-led attack on Iran or Syria.

"Paul has won our respect because he knows how important it is for Britain to follow its own foreign policy" Bannister says. Vote 4 Peace admit they are concerned people may not bother to vote this time. Says the campaign's director, ***"Anyone thinking of staying home on polling day should ask themselves if they want an MP who'll stick up for Britain deciding its own role in the world, independent of George Bush, or just another rubber stamp MP who does what the party bosses say."*** Adrian Bannister or Gerard Rosenberg Vote 4 Peace 01273 766636

Note: In the last two years the controversial Tory multi millionaire Lord Ashcroft has already directed £300,000 of his private fortune at marginal Liberal Democrat seats.

CHARLES KENNEDY LAUNCHES CAMPAIGN IN EAST MIDLANDS 6 April 2005

Speaking at a press conference in Kegworth earlier today (6th April 2005), Charles Kennedy told regional and national media that the Liberal Democrats would be sending more MPs to Westminster after the General Election.

Charles Kennedy said: ***"More and more people are looking to the Liberal Democrats to provide a real alternative to Labour and the Conservatives. And that's exactly what we're determined to do in this campaign. The Liberal Democrats will fight this campaign based on positive solutions to the real problems people face everyday. We will address people's hopes, not play to their fears."***

Charles was joined by Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, and Parmjit Singh Gill, MP who won the Leicester South by-election last year. Jill Hope, the Liberal Democrat PPC for Harborough, who needs only a 6% swing to win, chaired the press conference.

Paul said: ***"In my constituency Labour have lost every election since 2001. People are not prepared to keep giving them a second chance to improve their lives."***

Parmjit said: ***"Tony Blair's decision to put the war in Iraq ahead of investing in our schools and dear. Only voting Lib Dem sends a clear message that he was wrong."***

Jill said: ***"When Michael Howard was last in government, he left our public services in a terrible state. The Liberal Democrats are the real alternative."***

CHARLES KENNEDY SAID:

Here in the East Midlands the Liberal Democrats are expecting to be adding to the gains we made at the last general election.

More and more people are looking to the Liberal Democrats to provide a real alternative to Labour and the Conservatives. And that's exactly what we're determined to do in this campaign.

Britain is in so many ways a fortunate country. By international standards we are an affluent society. But we can and must do better. We want a fairer Britain. A Britain of real opportunity for young people and of dignity for our older people. A Britain with quality local public services - good schools and clean hospitals.

So the Liberal Democrats will fight this campaign based on positive solutions to the real problems people face everyday. We will address people's hopes, not play to their fears.

Here in Derbyshire and the East Midlands we will be campaigning hard. In Chesterfield at the last election and in Leicester South at the recent by-election, the people chose Paul Holmes and Parmjit Singh Gill to represent them.

At this election in, with Jill Hope in Harborough, in Derby and Northampton and across the region, we will be setting out our positive message.

Just as we have done in Scotland, the Liberal Democrats would scrap student tuition fees the whole of the UK and provide free personal care for the elderly- help with things like washing or feeding - for people with long term illnesses.

We will provide quicker diagnosis for serious health problems and end the 'hidden waiting lists.'

We will end the scandal of discrimination against women in our pensions system, and give £100 more a month to all pensioners over 75.

The deeply unfair council tax will be scrapped. A local income tax based on ability to pay would give a typical household an extra £450 a year and 6 million pensioners would pay no local tax at all.

We will cut class sizes in our schools.

We will provide 10,000 more police and keep them out on the streets longer by cutting back on paperwork.

And we are straightforward about what this would cost. We say no hidden taxes.

First, we would ask the wealthiest 1% of taxpayers to pay that bit more. Second, we would redirect £5bn a year of existing government spending by scrapping wasteful Government programmes like compulsory ID cards and cutting back central government departments.

The sums add up. The balance sheet is balanced. People feel badly let down by Labour.

When you break your promises over tax increases and imposing student top up fees people don't forget.

Nor will people forgive the fact that Tony Blair lined up with George Bush and we were misled into the Iraq war.

The Liberal Democrats have been principled and consistent on all these matters during the last parliament.

The Conservatives just can't offer credibly the fresh alternative that the country is looking for. They are a party of the past, not the future.

It's time for something different. Liberal Democrats are the real alternative.

POSITIVE SOLUTIONS TO REAL PROBLEMS 07 April 2005

Paul Holmes MP and Chesterfield Liberal Democrats have pledged their commitment to offering the people of Chesterfield positive solutions to real problems:

“Chesterfield Liberal Democrats are growing from strength to strength. Since we won in 2001, trust in Labour has been broken nationally not least by the illegal invasion of Iraq. “Locally we have won every election since 2001 taking 75% of seats on Chesterfield Borough Council in 2003, coming first locally in the European election for the first time ever in 2004 and winning every council by-election since 2001. The Conservatives are completely out of the race fielding just five candidates for 48 council seats in 2003 and winning none since 1995. “We will fight this campaign based on positive solutions to the real problems people face everyday. We will address people’s hopes, not play to their fears. We will not just criticise, we will set out what we would do differently.””

Wishing Paul Holmes and the nine Liberal Democrat county council candidates good luck in the election campaign, the Rt. Hon. Charles Kennedy Leader of the Liberal Democrats said:

“More and more people are looking to the Liberal Democrats to provide a real alternative to Labour and the Conservatives. And that is exactly what we are determined to do in this campaign.

“Scrapping student tuition fees and providing free personal care for the elderly across the UK – just as we have already done in Scotland. Providing quicker diagnosis for serious health problems and ending the ‘hidden waiting lists.’ Ending the scandal of discrimination against women in our pensions system, and giving £100 more a month to all pensioners over 75. Scrapping the unfair council tax. Delivering more police, smaller school class sizes and putting the environment right at the centre of our plans.

“And we will be straightforward about what our plans would cost and how we would pay for them. First, we would ask the wealthiest 1% of taxpayers to pay that bit more on that part of their earnings over £100,000. Second, we would redirect £5bn a year of existing government spending by scrapping wasteful government programmes like compulsory ID cards and cutting back central government departments.

“There are no no-go-areas for the Liberal Democrats at this election. We are aiming to take seats from both Labour and the Conservatives in every part of the country. We are united, working hard and confident that we can make another great advance.”

LABOUR CANDIDATE REPORTED TO POLICE FOR BREAKING ELECTION

LAW 13th April 05

Lib Dem agent for Chesterfield Stuart Bray has today written to Labour County Council candidate for Hipper Division Michael Fanshawe demanding that he withdraw his candidacy for the local elections on May 5th. Stuart has also written to the Police.

As an employee of the County Council both now and on the day of nominations, Mr Fanshawe is barred from becoming a County Councillor and from standing for election to the County Council. However, under a strange twist of UK election law, now that his nomination has been accepted by council staff at Chesterfield Borough Council, the only person who can stop Mr Fanshawe being a candidate without expensive legal steps, is Mr Fanshawe himself, by withdrawing from the race. Stuart Bray said, *"We are calling on Mr Fanshawe to do the honourable thing. It may be that Labour party bosses did not explain to him the full detail of the law surrounding county council elections. But now that he is in full position of the facts, and now that he knows he has made a false declaration on his nomination papers, we hope he will withdraw from the election. **In the unlikely event that Mr Fanshawe should actually win the election, he would not be allowed to take up his seat on the council. The election would have to be re-run, at a cost to local council tax payers of something in the region of £4,000.**"*

In response to the news item on the 12 o'clock news (14 April 05) about the Labour candidate who is breaking the election law: "Labour Party claims that their candidate is ok because he only earns a low wage are simply untrue. Section 80 of the Local Government Act 1972 sets out clearly that is ANY paid employment. This is confirmed by the guidance sent to all candidates by the Government's Electoral Commission Labour's new claims are simply wrong. Labour's candidate has either made a big mistake and is therefore not fit to hold office or he is deliberately trying to mislead people. Either way he should now do the honourable thing and resign." Cllr Stuart Bray East Midlands Campaigns Officer & Agent for Chesterfield Lib Dems

The Borough Council now says "Before the last day for withdrawal of nominations, it was pointed out to Mr Fanshawe by the Elections Officer that as an employee of Derbyshire County Council it would be questionable if he would be allowed to serve on the authority, should he win the election.

"His nominations papers were, however, valid and there was no legal reason for us to reject them. Despite our advice, he has not withdrawn his nomination and the election will therefore take place with his name listed as one of the candidates for the ward. Should he win the poll, it would be up to any aggrieved party to petition an Electoral Court, which would consider the matter."

LIB DEM POSTER VAN PLEDGES FREE PERSONAL CARE FOR ELDERLY

12 April 2005

Paul Holmes Lib Dem Parliamentary Candidate for Chesterfield has (12 April 2005) unveiled the Liberal Democrats' mobile poster campaign outside Chesterfield Town Hall.

The touring poster announced the Lib Dem pledge to provide free personal care when people most need it – so that no one is forced to sell their home to pay for their care.

Chesterfield has a higher than average elderly population. There are nearly 18,000 pensioners who could benefit from free personal care under a Lib Dem government.

Paul said: “Those towards the end of their lives deserve dignity. No-one should be forced to sell the home they love to pay for their care. The Prime Minister said he did not want to live in a country where the elderly were forced to sell their homes to pay for their care. Eight years on and an estimated 500,000 people have had to sell their homes. Labour broke their promise to end charging for long term care. Blair rejected his own Royal Commission’s expert and independent advice to introduce free personal care. This resulted in life-long Labour activist Claire Rayner, who chaired the Commission, switching to the Lib Dems. The Lib Dems will provide free personal care when people most need it – for as long as they live. We will implement the recommendations of the independent Royal Commission on long term care for all of the UK, as we have done in Scotland.”

HOLMES FIGHTS TO REDUCE LOCAL WAITING TIMES FOR HEARING AIDS 18 April 2005

Paul Holmes, Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Candidate for Chesterfield, is campaigning to drastically reduce local waiting times for digital hearing aids.

A national survey has revealed that new patients wait 47 weeks on average for a hearing aid, but it can be as long as four years. The Government pledge is to reduce the maximum waiting time to 18 weeks by 2008.

Paul has written to Chesterfield Primary Care Trust calling on them to invest in a Public Private Partnership that has been developed by the Royal National Institute for the Blind to reduce waiting times.

Paul said:

“I was deeply disappointed to learn that Chesterfield and North Derbyshire Royal Hospital NHS Trust is not participating in the RNID’s highly successful scheme.

“Almost half the audiology services in England are investing in this PPP to increase capacity and reduce waiting times. Over 23,000 people have already been referred to the scheme and so far hospitals have committed to ensuring that over 50,000 will receive their NHS hearing aids through this scheme by March 2006.

“I have written to Chesterfield PCT urging them to invest in this PPP to make sure that waiting times for the fitting of NHS digital hearing aids are reduced for Chesterfield’s residents.”

LABOUR GOVERNMENT DISCRIMINATES AGAINST DERBYSHIRE PUPILS 12 May 2005

Derbyshire pupils receive £2000 less than their East London peers 10 May 2006

Liberal Democrat MP for Chesterfield, Paul Holmes, has slammed the Labour Government’s system for allocating education funding which discriminates sharply against children in Derbyshire:

each pupil in Derbyshire receives 19% below the English average and 2.4% below the average for other counties;

of 150 local education authorities nationwide, Derbyshire primary schools are placed 10th from the bottom at £2,402 per pupil, compared with £4,155 in Tower Hamlets. The county's secondary schools receive just £3,040 per pupil, placing them 16th from the bottom compared to £5,051 in Tower Hamlets;

Inadequate funding has had a direct impact upon local schools:

in Chesterfield's primary and secondary schools class sizes have been higher than the national average since Labour came to power²; teacher vacancy rates have increased by 200% in maintained secondary schools in the East Midlands since Labour came to power³.

Paul Holmes MP said:

"The Labour Government's system for allocating education funding makes a mockery of the Secretary of State for Education's statement in November 2004 that 'Every child is different but of equal worth'. Despite their promises, Labour has failed to eradicate the inequality in their current funding system. Pupils in Chesterfield, including my own school age children, are being discriminated against by the Labour Government whose funding policy values each child according to their postcode."

Rt Hon Tony Blair MP 10 Downing Street London, SW1A 2AA

10 May 2005

Dear Mr Blair,

I am writing in support of the f40 group 'Pupil Entitlement Model' as a replacement for the existing model used to determine school funding. As you know the current system discriminates badly against pupils in shire counties such as Derbyshire, making a mockery of the Secretary of State for Education's statement in November 2004 that "Every child is different but of equal worth."

*In fact it is clear that under this Government's system of allocating education funding, all children **are not of equal worth** and **those in Derbyshire, including my constituency of Chesterfield and my own school age children, are discriminated against by your funding policy which:** gives each pupil in Derbyshire 19% below the English average and 2.4% below the average for other counties; of 150 local education authorities nationwide, places Derbyshire primary schools 10th from the bottom at £2,402 per pupil, compared with £4,155 in Tower Hamlets. The county's secondary schools receive just £3,040 per pupil, placing them 16th from the bottom compared to £5,051 in Tower Hamlets.*

results in higher class sizes in Chesterfield's primary and secondary schools which have been higher than the national average since Labour came to power. In 2004 the average single teacher class size in Chesterfield's primary schools was 28.6, compared to a national average of 26.2; has resulted in a 200% increase in teacher vacancy rates in maintained secondary schools in the East Midlands since Labour came to power.

Promises made ever since 1997 indicated that improvements would be made in the funding mechanism, but the position of the worst funded Councils in relation to the majority of the country has not been lifted. The same authorities continue to be at the bottom of the funding league and the Government's tinkering with the formulae has not eradicated the inequities and unfairness of the funding system. The gap between the 'haves and the have nots' has got bigger and there has been no effort to ensure that the basic entitlement for each pupil is addressed. That means that the postcode lottery that, that sees pupils in some areas receiving massively greater funding than in others such as Derbyshire, continues to operate.

The Labour Government's current Green Paper sets the funding framework for the next three years and simply proposes to continue with the same method of allocating funds that already treats Derbyshire schoolchildren unfairly. That means that the children of my constituency will continue to be poorly funded. The Government must set a basic entitlement per pupil across the country before taking other factors into consideration - as proposed in the f40 Pupil Entitlement Model. Failure to do this will mean that the Labour Government continues to discriminate against children in Chesterfield and Derbyshire.

Yours sincerely, **Paul Holmes MP**

MORE OF THE SAME DESPITE REJECTION BY VOTERS

31 May 2005

A disappointing Queen's Speech simply offers more of the same policies that were rejected by 64% of voters less than two weeks ago.

Tony Blair gained just 36% of the votes cast in the General Election - the lowest share of the vote of any Government since 1832. Despite this he is continuing to ignore the people of this country and is ploughing ahead with more of the same New Labour spin and gloss.

Proposals include last session's failed Identity Cards Bill and an Education Bill that will allow new independent providers such as faith groups or businesses to set up state schools.

Paul Holmes, Liberal Democrat MP for Chesterfield said:

"Tony Blair talks of 'respect and security' but fails to explain how 24 hour drinking and the under funding of Derbyshire Police will achieve this in our area. Derbyshire Police - already among the worst funded in the country - have received one of the lowest budget increases in England this year leaving them with a £4.1 million shortfall.

"Tackling crime on the street, drunks and the gangs of youths plaguing some neighbourhoods in Chesterfield needs more police on the beat. Instead, Labour has cut the local police budget and wants to pour £3 - 6 Billion down the drain on an ID Card system which will fail to tackle these problems.

"Once again there is a great deal of talk about education. But Derbyshire pupils still receive 19% less funding than the English average, amounting to more than £2000 less per pupil than their East London peers.

"Setting up brand new Academies at a cost of £25 million (compared to the average state school cost of £14million) and then handing them over to private individuals with no education credentials, is not the answer to the under funding of our schoolchildren in Chesterfield and Derbyshire. Yet this is all that is on offer."

HOLMES – MPS SHOULD HAVE LAST WORD ON WAR

31 May 2005

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, is campaigning for a change in Britain's law to ensure that no government can send our troops to war without first securing Parliament's approval.

The mechanism for declaring war is operated by the Prime Minister via the Royal Prerogative, sidelining our elected representatives in the House of Commons.

Paul Holmes MP said:

"The decision to go to war is one of the most momentous decisions a government can take. Yet MPs are denied a voice in this process. More than 80% of the British people, over 200 MPs in the last parliament and a House of Commons Select Committee, all believe that parliamentary approval should be necessary to send our forces into armed conflict.

In 2003 Tony Blair sent British troops to war in Iraq on a flawed prospectus to risk their lives in a conflict of dubious legality. The will of the British people was ignored with devastating consequence. If we are to protect Britain's democracy, it is vital that MPs have the last word on war."

PAUL BACKS LOCAL LYMPHOEDEMA AWARENESS DAY

31 May 2005

Paul Holmes, is lending his support to this year's Lymphoedema Awareness Day which is being organised by Macmillan Cancer Relief's Chesterfield Lymphoedema Team.

Paul Holmes MP will be attending the awareness day himself as he feels strongly about the importance of raising the awareness of Lymphoedema.

Paul said: "My wife has been living with Lymphoedema for over a year now so I know just how difficult it can be. There are many people out there who have no idea what Lymphoedema is and I am a firm believer that if we talk about things more openly it makes them less scary. "The Macmillan Lymphoedema Team do a wonderful job in supporting local people living with Lymphoedema. So I am lending my support to Lymphoedema Awareness Day on Friday 3 June."

Kathryn Donohue, Macmillan Lymphoedema Service Manager, and her team are inviting members of the public to attend the awareness day being held at Chesterfield Library from 10am until 4pm on Friday 3 June. The aim of the day is to provide members of the public with information and advice about Lymphoedema and the services that are available locally.

HOLMES CONDEMNS PRESCOTT'S FORCED PRIVATISATION OF COUNCIL HOMES 15 June 2005

The cross party Parliamentary Council Housing Group has today published a damning report that reveals country-wide opposition amongst tenants and councils to John Prescott's forced 'privatisation' of housing stock, and widespread support for the 'fourth option' of public investment in council housing.

Support for the Fourth Option for Council Housing is the result of three hearings held by The House of Commons Council Housing Group in Parliament and in Newcastle. At these meetings tenants, councillors, housing officers and unions from all parts of the country gave evidence about the illegitimate pressure on councils to divest themselves of housing. It demonstrates the need to give tenants the option they really want: to stay with the council, and shows how this can be achieved.

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield and Liberal Democrat Shadow Minister for Housing and Planning, is vice chair of the cross-party Parliamentary Council Housing Group. Paul said: "This report comes out just as the government's war on council housing comes to its climax with the July deadline for councils to accept one of three options tenants don't want. It arms councillors and tenants to resist. It's time to stop wasting millions to give away billions of public assets. It's time to allow councils to play the part only they can play, in regeneration and tackling Britain's desperate need for social housing.

"The Government's housing policy is the privatisation of council housing by stealth. Tenants are being coerced into giving up their secure tenancies on false assurances of improvements, on which the RSLs and ALMOs have often failed to deliver. Local authorities have a good track record of maintaining and managing council homes and should be allowed the same access to borrowing and finance as the private sector does. Council housing is being placed at the mercy of market forces and the government is gambling with the homes of some of the most vulnerable people in the country."

THOUSANDS OF CHESTERFIELD FAMILIES EACH REPAYING £940 OF TAX CREDITS 22 June 2005

Paul Holmes has slammed the Government over the administration of the tax credit system, following astonishing figures published on the number of overpayments made by HM Revenue and Customs.

In Chesterfield constituency alone, of the 9,800 tax credit claims 3,300 were overpayments, with the average family paying back £939.39 each.

Commenting on the figures, Paul Holmes said:

“These figures are unprecedented and reflect the serious problems not only with the computer system, but inherent within the new tax credit system. I have been inundated with letters from constituents concerned about this issue. There are many local cases where the tax credit office has attempted to claw back money that had often been overpaid as a result of internal administrative error rather than customer misinformation. Too many families are having their budgets thrown into chaos by the tax credit office causing serious problems and hardship especially for those on low incomes. “What we do not yet know, however, is how many of these overpayments were a result of official error and how many the Revenue will write off. Last week Treasury Ministers signalled changes to the way overpayments are clawed back. The statement was an implicit admission that the Revenue have not been acting responsibly in the past. But new guidance alone will not solve this problem. The policy of reassessing income at the end of the award is flawed and a return to a system of fixed awards would end this bureaucratic nightmare for many families.”

COUNCIL HOUSING FACING COLLAPSE 23 June 2005

Massive rent rises to result from Labour Government’s ‘perverse’ funding system for England’s 2,457,000 council houses, according to a shocking report published yesterday by the National Audit Office.

The complex system means that tenants in the East Midlands pay as much as £5 a week from their rent to subsidise others – mainly in London. Unless this funding system is changed, the one in nine families living in council properties across the country will suffer huge rent rises as increasing numbers of people use right-to-buy schemes to purchase their own properties.

Councils have until July to choose between three types of privatisation for the future of their housing. A fourth option would ensure council homes receive the investment they need while remaining in the hands of the local council.

Paul Holmes MP for Chesterfield and Vice-Chair of the House of Commons Council Housing Group said:

“This latest damning report from the National Audit Office adds to stinging criticism of the Government’s housing policy from the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee and the House of Commons Council Housing Group. So far council tenants in 30 authorities have rejected moves to privatise their homes. Labour Party members themselves voted overwhelmingly in support of a fourth option at last year’s Labour Party Conference.

“Yet in the face of such devastating condemnation the Labour Government refuses to be driven from its course of the privatisation of England’s council homes. The Government’s dogged commitment to this highly unpopular measure is demonstrated today by their announcement of 61 schemes that will privatise council properties in 34 local authorities.

“Councillors and tenants deserve the opportunity to choose a fourth option that would bring vitally needed funds to council-run homes without resorting to privatisation.”

RECORD NUMBER OF TAX CREDIT COMPLAINTS ARE SUCCEEDING 24 June 2005

Commenting on the publication of the Adjudicator's Office Annual Report 2005 which highlights the severe problems with the tax credit system, Paul Holmes MP said:

"There were 3700 cases of overpaid tax credits revealed for the previous year in Chesterfield. This year things could be even worse and it is well worth considering a formal complaint if you believe you have been treated unfairly by the Revenue.

"The report confirms what a shambles the administration of tax credits is in – 86% of complaints are being upheld by the independent adjudicator.

"I will continue to press the Government for an urgent review of the case for returning to a system of fixed awards to end the bureaucratic nightmare being faced by so many families."

CHESTERFIELD'S CHILDREN JOIN HOLMES IN CALL FOR EDUCATION FOR ALL 28 June 2005

Paul Holmes has bade farewell to scores of 'buddies' made by local pupils to represent the 100 million children around the world who are out of school.

The colourful figures of children are beginning a long journey to Edinburgh, escorted by the Liberal Democrat MP for Edinburgh West, where they will be presented to leaders of some of the world's richest and most influential countries at the G8 summit in Gleneagles.

Paul said: *"The buddies made by pupils at Walton and Holymoorside School and Birdholme Infant School represent some of the 100 million children in the world who do not go to school. The UN Millennium Development Goals set a target of getting as many girls and boys in school by 2005. This was to be the first step on the way to ensuring all children have an education by 2015. This target will be missed in at least 70 countries. The need for action is urgent if there is to be any realistic chance of meeting the 2015 target. The voices of Chesterfield's children will be heard loud and clear when these buddies are presented to world leaders at the G8 summit in July."*

GOVERNMENT FORCING COUNCIL TENANTS INTO 'SHOTGUN DIVORCE' 30 June 2005

Paul Holmes MP for Chesterfield and Vice-Chair of the House of Commons Council Housing Group yesterday issued a stark warning to the Government about the devastating impact of their council housing policy.

Speaking in a debate with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Jim Fitzpatrick MP, Paul said:

"As council housing stock falls every year due to the right to buy, so the waiting list for family houses increases. As the population ages so the waiting list for old age pensioners' bungalows increases. But Government policy is starving councils of the investment they desperately need to meet this demand.

"Every year the Government claw back about 14% of the rent that Chesterfield council tenants pay. That money is paid by Chesterfield council tenants to the council housing department and taken by the Government to spend elsewhere. During the past financial year that amounted to £3.2 million. If Chesterfield council were allowed to keep just half of this amount, it would have no problems whatever for the next 30 years in maintaining a high standard of council housing.

“The Labour Government is robbing councils of their tenants’ rental income and trying to force tenants into a shotgun divorce by saying ‘You can exercise the right to choose to stay with the council as your landlord, but over the years that will mean that your houses and estates will decline as the Government withhold finance.’

“Councillors and tenants deserve the opportunity to choose a fourth option that would bring vitally needed funds to council-run homes without resorting to privatisation.”

HOLMES LEADS MPS’ CAMPAIGN AGAINST MEDICAL CENTRE CLOSURES 30 June 2005

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, has today tabled an Early Day Motion calling on the Government and Atos Origin to abandon proposals to close 21 Medical Examination Centres across the country - including the only two in Derbyshire.

Atos Origin, the private company contracted by the Government to conduct medical examinations for benefit claimants, has announced the closure of the Medical Examining Centres in both Derby and Chesterfield.

For a second time, Paul has written to the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Atos Origin requesting an urgent meeting with them to prevent the closure of these vital centres.

Paul Holmes MP said:

“The imminent closure of all Medical Examination Centres in Derbyshire will force those claiming benefits to travel as far as Sheffield, Nottingham or Manchester if they require a medical assessment.

“If the Minister again refuses an urgent meeting I can only assume that the welfare of some of the most vulnerable members of our society is not a matter of interest to her, her Department or the Labour Government.”

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“Every year the Government claw back about 14% of the rent that Chesterfield council tenants pay. That money is paid by Chesterfield council tenants to the council housing department and taken by the Government to spend elsewhere. During the past financial year that amounted to £3.2 million. If Chesterfield council were allowed to keep just half of this amount, it would have no problems whatever for the next 30 years in maintaining a high standard of council housing.

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“Councillors and tenants deserve the opportunity to choose a fourth option that would bring vitally needed funds to council-run homes without resorting to privatisation.”

Notes:

1. The House of Commons Council Housing group, of which Paul Holmes is vice-chair, has produced a 40 page report documenting the evidence they gathered from their inquiry into support for the 'fourth option'. See <http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/dch/>.

2. **Paul's contribution to yesterday's debate regarding council housing is attached below:**

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase) on securing this important debate, which a number of Members were trying to secure.

May I recommend to the Minister that in his urgent bedtime reading tonight is the report of the Defend Council Housing group—of which I have the pleasure of being the vice-chairman—the Audit Commission report published last week that described the system of funding for council housing as perverse, the Public Accounts Committee report that criticised the inequitable funding system that the Government have introduced and the report of the Select Committee on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which contained the same message.

A few weeks ago at the start of the Session, 45 Bills were introduced into Parliament, not one of which addressed the scandal of this Government's policies on council housing, which starve councils of the money and ability to build new social housing, rob councils of their tenants' rental income and try to force tenants into a shotgun divorce by saying "You can exercise the right to choose to stay with the council as your landlord, but over the years that will mean that your houses and estates will decline as the Government withhold finance."

I shall use the borough council in my constituency as an example, but this example could be repeated in scores of councils throughout the country: in Birmingham, Camden, Southwark, North-East Derbyshire, Cambridge and Bolsover, and many other areas. The details will differ slightly, but the principles are exactly the same. A quarter of the houses in my constituency are still council houses—that is 10,000 houses, and would be 20,000 but for the right-to-buy policies over the past 15 years or so. It is therefore a major issue for almost one in four of my constituents. As council housing stock falls every year due to the right to buy, so the waiting list for family houses increases. Can the council build new family houses? Effectively, no. As the population ages so the waiting list for old age pensioners' bungalows increases, but can the council do anything to meet that demand? Effectively, no, because of Government policies.

Instead, the council in Chesterfield, like all other councils in the country, is required by Government diktat to have by the end of next month—July 2005—employed independent consultants to analyse the housing stock and the finances and to consult and survey tenant opinion prior to a possible stock transfer

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ballot. The cost of that process so far in Chesterfield is approaching £250,000 in payments to the independent consultants and the time of the staff in the council housing department. If the process went through to a full ballot by spring next year, the cost would be about £500,000, which is money that could far more effectively be invested in the council housing stock.

At the end of that process a choice may be offered to council tenants—a Hobson's choice—with them being told, "You can switch to a housing association or a private finance initiative landlord and there will be no financial problems in terms of improving and maintaining your houses and estates into the future. Now, there will be drawbacks. You will have less secure tenancies and you may have a remote landlord, because many of the housing associations that start off as very local are taking part in a wave of mergers across the country and becoming large national organisations. So your local housing association office might end up being somewhere else in the country." I know from housing associations in Chesterfield that some are very good and very local, but some are not very good, distant and hard to get hold of.

One difference with a housing association is that when a transfer has been made it cannot be changed. The housing association cannot be voted out for a new landlord.

Kelvin Hopkins : Has the hon. Gentleman had the same experience as I have with housing associations in that many of their tenants tell me to tell council tenants not to vote for stock transfer, whatever they do?

Paul Holmes : That is not the experience in Chesterfield because we have not gone through that process yet, but when going around the country and talking to people, including housing association tenants, I have certainly heard that from people who have undergone the transfer process. With this Government, tenants have the alternative choice of staying with the council, but they see the money run out over five, 10 or 15 years, and the quality of their houses, estates and management declines. A particular problem in Chesterfield is that a decent minimum housing standard can be achieved quite easily by 2010 because Chesterfield's standard is well above the Government's minimum. The problem will be retention because over the years our tenants will see a decline from the present high standards down to minimum levels due to the funding regime imposed by the Government.

Why should that happen and why can the council not provide the same level of repairs, modernisation and estate management as a housing association or private landlord? Is it because they are less well run? That is certainly not true in Chesterfield, although it may have been to 2002, when the housing department received a bad report from Government inspectors, but in May 2003 council tenants changed their landlord—they could not have done that if they had switched to a housing association or private finance initiative manager—when they elected a Liberal Democrat council and there were considerable changes. I am not making a party political point because other hon. Members will say the same in reverse based on their experience in other parts of the country.

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The point is that tenants can change their management if their housing is run by the council. Satisfaction ratings of 58 per cent. back in 2002 are now 84 per cent. Repairs that took an average of six weeks to be carried out now take an average of four days. Appointments for repairs have been introduced, but none existed before. Re-let times have fallen from 45 days to 29 days. The number of voids are down and the level of rent collection has risen. There has been a range of increases using the same management and housing department staff as before. There was no need to bring in outside contractors and consultants, PFI, private expertise or housing associations. The new management on the council simply allowed the housing department staff to get on with their job. Management expertise exists and privatisation is not necessary to achieve it.

Is the reason financial? Many examples have been documented in the Public Accounts Committee's reports and the Defend Council Housing campaign's report that came out last week. There are many examples of debt write-off and so on. I shall give two small and simple examples.

In Chesterfield every year the Government claw back about 14 per cent. of the rent that council tenants pay in Chesterfield. That money is paid by Chesterfield council tenants to the council housing department and taken by the Government to spend elsewhere. During the past financial year that amounted to £3.2 million from an income of £22 million. If Chesterfield council were allowed to keep just half of that £3 million to £4 million that is taken away every year, it would have no problems whatever for the next 30 years in maintaining a high standard of council housing. However, because the money is taken away, over the next five, 10 or 15 years it will struggle and have to impose charges simply to raise £500,000 just to keep afloat on an even keel.

The same applies to the right to buy. Every year, money comes in from the right to buy. Last year, Chesterfield received £8 million, of which £6 million was taken by the Government to spend elsewhere. Only £2 million was retained in Chesterfield to reinvest in council property. Again, if just half of the money that was taken away was left with Chesterfield, it would make all the difference not only in maintaining the existing stock, but to building new housing, particularly old folks' bungalows.

Why do the Government pursue these policies? I asked that question at Prime Minister's questions on 8 December last year, but was simply told that we should celebrate choice. I do celebrate choice and if council tenants choose to leave the council, that is their choice and is fine. I would

respect and support that because I have seen enough badly run council estates throughout the country. I grew up in a council flat.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the present housing crisis is predicted to become worse in terms of low-cost social housing for rent? The evidence is that the Government's policy is driven by them wanting to abdicate responsibility for housing.

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Paul Holmes : I have much sympathy with that point of view. If I were to go off at a tangent, I could mention various other areas of Government policy—such as trying to help young couples to get on to the housing ladder through the private sector and a number of Government initiatives. On the right to buy, I remember that when I was first elected as a councillor in Chesterfield in 1987, Labour councillors bitterly complained about that policy, which a Conservative Government had introduced. I said to them, "But surely if your party had introduced that policy, you would have welcomed it as a great method of socialist redistribution of wealth. The council uses public money to build houses; people rent those houses for a number of years; they then get a discount on buying their houses; and people who otherwise would never have been able to afford to get on to the housing ladder, or who would never have even thought of getting on to it, are able to do so if they so wish." Therefore, in principle, I have no objection to that policy either. The Government are now trying to encourage people in the private sector to get on to the housing ladder, at a time when the housing market is incredibly expensive. Is there a simpler way to address this issue than to allow proper provision of social housing through that tried-and-trusted method of the last century, council housing?

At Prime Minister's questions and through written questions, I have asked why the Government are pursuing this policy when all the reports, all the finances, all the logic and the democratic choice are against it. Time and again we get the answer that we should celebrate choice. Yes, there should be choice. Council tenants should be able to choose to leave council management, but it must be choice on a level playing field rather than the loaded system that the Government currently impose. Given that level playing field, most council tenants would choose not to leave the secure landlord who provides good housing and who they have known for a long time. Even in some areas—Birmingham and Camden, for example—where the council has recommended that the only way forward was for estates to leave the council, tenants have voted in huge numbers not to do so. Therefore, if there were choice on a level playing field, I have no doubt that most council estates would never choose to transfer.

The Government seem to be oblivious to that; I hope that the Minister can reassure us that that is not the case. The Government tell us time and again that no fourth option is being considered. They told us that most recently only a month ago, on 23 May, in answers I received to a series of questions that I had asked. One response was:

"The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to change the funding mechanism for councils whose tenants vote for their housing to remain under both council ownership and direct management."

Another answer was:

"The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has no plans to implement a 'fourth option'."

And yet another answer was:

"There are no current plans to change the housing revenue account subsidy system."—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 23 May 2005; Vol. 434, c. 33–36.]

It seems that the Government are set on continuing their unfair, divisive and undemocratic policy.

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The money is there if people stay with the council, if the Government give them equality. If by next autumn every council tenant had switched to a housing association or a private finance initiative landlord, the money would be made available. If they stay with the council, the money is denied. Therefore, the money is available; it is simply denied to certain tenants who choose what in the Government's eyes is the wrong option.

The necessary management skills are also there, as we have seen in Chesterfield in the past two years. The customer satisfaction is there, too; there is 84 per cent. satisfaction in Chesterfield. Council tenants in Chesterfield will not forgive a Labour Government who refuse to respect their democratic choice and treat them equally with private tenants, and they will never forgive the La-

bour party locally or nationally if it lets a Labour Government get away with this abuse of democratic choice.

I hope that the Minister will not repeat the platitudes that I have heard in the past year or so about celebrating choice when, in fact, the Government deny that very choice. I hope that the Government will heed the report of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Committee, the Public Accounts Committee, the Audit Commission and the Defend Council Housing group report, and rethink their policies.

Cabinet votes to retain housing stock July 6, 2005

Chesterfield Borough Council's Cabinet is unanimously recommending to full Council next week (July 20) that the Council should retain the ownership and management of its housing stock of 10,000 homes.

If approved by full Council, the decision will mean the Council has chosen the option favoured by a substantial majority of its tenants who responded to a survey; but there will need to be spending adjustments to ensure the service remains viable.

The analysis was made after the Government instructed all Councils to carry out a "stock options appraisal" by July 31 this year. The appraisal had to be based, as a minimum, on whether the Council could meet the national target of the Decent Homes Standard by 2010 and sustain this for 30 years.

The decision, in preference to transferring the stock to another landlord, was made after exhaustive year-long analysis of the way forward for Chesterfield's Council housing service, which has been in Borough Council ownership for over 80 years.

A full detailed appraisal has taken place in Chesterfield over the last year, including a financial analysis and full consultations with tenants' representatives.

The appraisal came to the view that there were two options for Chesterfield:

Retain the current stock in Council ownership and management, OR Transfer the stock to an existing or new Housing Association

Cllr Tony Rogers, the Borough's Lead Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods, said: ***"This has been a difficult decision for the Council, as a stock retention option will mean having to make substantial savings and reductions in the repairs budget and in capital investment. On the balance of all the evidence before us, we believe that retention of the housing stock represents the best interests of tenants, leaseholders and the Borough Council at the present time and the safest option for tenants for the following reasons:***

The Council is able to meet Government targets for achieving decent homes standard by 2010

The current high levels of tenant satisfaction with the Council's housing service, which is at an all-time high

The results of the tenants "test of opinion" which shows a substantial majority in favour of stock retention (68%)

A new report by the Audit Commission on the financing of Council housing which calls on the Government to re-examine the way in which Council housing is funded to make it a fairer system

Stock retention provides a higher level of democratic accountability than stock transfer

The possible risks associated with a transfer to a new landlord

The fact that a transfer would be irreversible, if the Government subsequently changed the way housing is funded so as to benefit Chesterfield."

After the final decision at full Council on July 20, the proposal has to be agreed as acceptable by Government Office for the East Midlands.

HOLMES BACKS ALZHEIMER'S AWARENESS WEEK 6 July 2005

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, today expressed support for people with dementia and their carers in Chesterfield in the run up to Alzheimer's Awareness Week.

More than 945 people living in Chesterfield have dementia and more than three times that number are affected by the consequences.

Paul said: *"I am very happy to be supporting the Alzheimer's Society during Alzheimer's Awareness Week. When we think of dementia we usually think of older people and it is important to remember that dementia can affect anyone at any age."*

Neil Hunt, Chief Executive of the Alzheimer's Society said: *"I'm delighted that Mr Paul Holmes MP is supporting Alzheimer's Awareness Week. The week will invite us to think again about how we should be supporting younger people with dementia and their families."*

The theme of the week, which will run from 3 to 9 July 2005, is 'Think again', and the Alzheimer's Society will be focusing on the issues that affect younger people with dementia. These include financial and employment issues.

HOLMES CELEBRATES LIB DEM STRENGTH AND SUCCESS

20 September 2005

Speaking at an evening debate on future policy direction ahead of today's Meeting the Challenge policy consultation, Paul Holmes, Chair of the Parliamentary Party and MP for Chesterfield analysed the traditional Social Liberal philosophy behind the manifesto that saw the Liberal Democrats achieve their third record-breaking election result in a row:

"We had our most successful election since 1923. The Tories continued to flat-line making no recovery in votes and Blair slumped to the lowest share of the vote of any government in history. Overall we held off the Tory challenge and for the first time in history made significant gains from Labour.

"We achieved this success because of the blend of policies that mark us out as being distinct from both the right-wing Tories and New Labour.

"The Liberal Democrats are the defenders of civil liberties and the champions of social justice. We are the greenest party. We are internationalist. We retain our commitment to fair and progressive taxation, and to equity of access to education and the NHS. We are strong in our convictions and we will not be led by focus groups and opinion polls.

"It would be a disaster if we were to abandon these principles and successful policies in order to imitate New Labour's pursuit of tabloid headlines, or to pass ourselves off as just another pale imitation of the Conservatives as Blair has done.

"We did not win Conservative seats by being more right wing than the Tories. We did not win Labour seats by tacking to the hard left. We won both because of our distinctive Liberal Democrat agenda. A confident and growing party should not abandon a winning formula that has strong resonance with the 52% of the electorate who say they identify with Liberal Democrat values."

'MAKE EVERY CUP OF COFFEE COUNT' FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH CANCER 13 September 2005

There are currently over 1 million people in the UK who have had a diagnosis of cancer so Macmillan's nurses, doctors, information and support service are needed now, more than ever.

Last year, the World's Biggest Coffee Morning, now in its 15th year, raised over £5.3 million in a single morning. All over the UK people held coffee mornings in their homes, at work and at school and this year the charity is hoping that even more people will join in.

Being a part of the World's Biggest Coffee Morning can be as simple as putting the kettle on and asking friends, family or colleagues to have a coffee and make a donation for each cup they drink. Macmillan provides everything you need, from invitations to a collection box.

Paul Holmes MP says: *"More than one in three people will be diagnosed with cancer at some time in their life. All of us know someone who has been affected by cancer and many of us have experienced the care and support Macmillan offers to people with cancer.*

"Whatever you're up to on 30 September, make sure you're part of the World's Biggest Coffee Morning – it's such a simple way to help raise money for Macmillan. I hope as many people as possible will join in."

HOLMES URGES CHESTERFIELD TEENAGERS: "TELL TONY HOW YOU'D RUN BRITAIN" 10 October 2005

Local MP Paul Holmes is urging Chesterfield's teenagers to make their voices heard by entering a Westminster competition.

The Parliamentary Press Gallery is holding its writing competition for the third year running to encourage discussion and interest in democratic debate among Britain's young people.

LABOUR HAS FAILED TO DELIVER SMALLER CLASS SIZES 18 October 2005

Labour has failed to deliver on pledges to reduce class sizes for many of our children. Over 15% of primary school kids in England are still taught in classes of 31 or more. In some areas the figures are much higher - **nearly 27% of children in Derbyshire are taught in classes of 31 or more pupils.**

Shockingly some children are even in classes with more than 41 pupils. Manchester tops the league here with 1.6% of its pupils in these extremely large classes.

The Liberal Democrats propose recruiting an extra 21,000 primary school teachers to reduce average classes sizes to 20 at Key Stage 1 (5-7 year olds) and 25 at Key Stage 2 (7-11 year olds).

The areas with the greatest percentage of primary school children taught in classes of 31 or more are:

East Sussex	32.0%	Bromley	25.6%
Trafford	27.4%	Shropshire	25.5%
Derbyshire	26.8%	Barnsley	25.0%
Telford and Wrekin	26.0%	North Lincolnshire	24.0%
Nottinghamshire	26.0%	Darlington	23.9%

Commenting on the figures local parent and former Derbyshire teacher, Paul Holmes MP said: *"Labour have run Derbyshire County Council for a quarter of a century. They used to blame Thatcher's Government for the gross under funding of our schools. After eight years of a Labour Government who are they going to blame now? Our children only get one chance at an education and these disgraceful figures show that Labour continue to let them down. "*

Liberal Democrat Education Spokesperson, Edward Davey MP said:

***“More than half a million primary school children are in classes of over 30. These shocking figures show just how badly the government has failed to get the basics right. Some areas in England are suffering with a third of primary school classrooms packed with more than 30 kids at a time. Despite what Ministers claim, parents in those areas know that Labour is failing their children.*”**

***“Large class sizes harm standards, effect discipline and are a major barrier to improvement in schools.*”**

***“All research in this area shows that for younger children, especially those who struggle in school, smaller classes are vital. Parents who can afford to opt for private education know that - because a main motivation for them has always been smaller class sizes.*”**

“If ministers were really listening to parents they would make smaller class sizes a priority.”

HOLMES - TAILORED SUPPORT BETTER THAN STEREOTYPED ATTACKS AT HELPING DISABLED PEOPLE INTO WORK 17 October 2005

Following the much trailed comments in the national press about how David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions wants people on incapacity benefits to stop watching daytime TV, get on their bikes and get a job, Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield said:

“I have repeatedly met with local Job Centre Plus staff, local claimants and organisations such as the Unemployed Workers Centre here in Chesterfield. Over the last 4 years as Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions I have also visited similar groups and centres all over the UK. I have witnessed the hard work of local disability employment advisers and jobcentre plus staff and it is a great pity that this is being damaged by a Secretary of State who seems more interested in courting dramatic media headlines that denigrate and stereotype many incapacity benefit recipients, instead of proposing effective measures to help those people back into work. There are 5,600 people claiming incapacity benefits in Chesterfield and very many of them will be more than willing to get the help and support they need to get a suitable job. Recent research shows that where there is individually targeted help and support, disabled people can be helped back into work. It also shows that in most cases the support available is very much appreciated. I shall be pressing the Government to ensure that there is genuine investment in high quality support and advice across the whole country. And I shall be critical when Government ministers conduct the debate around welfare reform in such negative terms that they risk undermining the prospects for real reform. It would have been better if Mr Blunkett had also taken the opportunity to publicise the Access to Work program which helps employers make a variety of adjustments in the workplace when they have employees with disabilities. This is a good scheme so it is a scandal that three quarters of small firms know nothing about it.”

HOLMES WINS VICTORY FOR DERBYSHIRE BENEFITS CLAIMANTS 19 October 2005

Paul Holmes, MP has today won a victory against the Labour Government in defence of some of Derbyshire's most vulnerable people.

The decision to close Derbyshire's only two medical examination centres – in Derby and Chesterfield – has been permanently reversed following unrelenting pressure from the local Liberal Democrat MP.

Earlier this year Atos Origin, the private company contracted by the Government to conduct medical examinations for benefits claimants, announced the imminent closure of 24 Medical Examining Centres across the country including both of those in Derbyshire – in Derby and Chesterfield.

Immediately upon hearing this Paul Holmes MP met with the Derbyshire Unemployed Workers' Centre and was the first MP to lobby the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to reverse this decision. In response to the MP for Chesterfield's request for an urgent meeting, local MPs met with the Minister and the black-listed Medical Examination Centres were granted a temporary reprieve. Paul Holmes maintained pressure on the Government by tabling an EDM that received widespread support.

Paul Holmes MP said: ***“Atos Origin's decision was driven by profit at the expense of some of the most vulnerable members of our society.***

“The closure of Derbyshire's centres would have forced those claiming benefits to travel as far as Sheffield, Nottingham or Manchester if they required a medical assessment. Being unable to work due to illness or incapacity is difficult and traumatic enough without having to travel long distances to remote assessment centres.

“The reversal of this detrimental decision is a victory for vulnerable people in Chesterfield, throughout Derbyshire and across the country.”

Our earlier story..

Chesterfield's unique Sculpture `Rosewall` to be sold

20 October 2005

A major piece of 20th Century Art, which has been on public display in Chesterfield for 40 years, is about to be sold at auction by the Royal Mail.

The sculpture, **(Curved Reclining Form) Rosewall by Barbara Hepworth**, was bought by the then Ministry of Works and the Post Office in 1963 as part of an office development in Chesterfield. Carved in Nebrasina stone, and measuring over 2 metres in length, the double pierced sculpture was sited on Council-owned land in front of the office block in Chesterfield town centre.

In 1996 English Heritage proposed listing the sculpture as a building of ***“special architectural or historic interest”*** and described it as a ***“rare example of government patronage.”*** The listing process was suspended pending redevelopment of the site by the Post Office, and although English Heritage had initially suggested listing on completion of the works, it subsequently decided that listing was no longer appropriate.

During redevelopment the sculpture was removed to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Although returned to its new position, it was again removed by Royal Mail to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and Chesterfield Borough Council was subsequently informed that it would be sold at auction.

Bonhams, who are selling the work as a highlight of their sale of 20th Century British Art on November 29th, describe the piece as a work of ***“seminal importance with outstanding provenance”*** and its sale as a ***“watershed event in the market for British Art.”***

They are confident that the work has every chance of exceeding the current world auction price for a Hepworth of £620,000.

Chesterfield Borough Council is extremely concerned about the loss of a major piece of public art

from Chesterfield and possibly the country. Lib Dem Cllr Stuart Bray, its Lead Member for Planning and Asset Management, said: ***"I am appalled by Royal Mail's decision to remove this sculpture from public display and sell to the highest bidder. Its removal from Chesterfield is particularly regrettable as the town has recently received national awards for its promotion of new public art as part of development schemes."***

The Leader of the Council, Ray Russell and the local MP, Paul Holmes, have written to the Chairman of Royal Mail, Allan Leighton, seeking an urgent meeting to consider ways of retaining the work in public ownership and in Chesterfield.

The Council will, on Wednesday (October 19), consider an all-party motion deploring the Royal Mail decision and asking it to postpone the intended auction and reconsider its decision with a view to returning Rosewall permanently to its rightful place in Chesterfield town centre.

The motion will invite other persons and organisations to express their support for the return of Rosewall to Chesterfield and to make their views known to the Royal Mail. (see later story above)

HOLMES CELEBRATES WITHDRAWAL OF LOCAL SCULPTURE FROM AUCTION 21 October 2005

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield and Chair of the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party is today celebrating Royal Mail's decision to withdraw Chesterfield's Hepworth sculpture from auction.

The Rosewall Sculpture, designed by Barbara Hepworth and bought by the then Post Office for display in Chesterfield, was due to go under the hammer at a London auction house in November. But today Alan Leighton, Chair of the Royal Mail Group plc, announced his withdrawal of the sculpture from auction.

Chesterfield's Liberal Democrat MP has tabled an Early Day Motion welcoming this announcement but calling on Royal Mail to return the sculpture to its rightful home on public display in the town centre. He has also tabled numerous parliamentary questions to various government departments to place pressure on the Government to intervene.

Paul said: *"With the Liberal Democrat-run Chesterfield Borough Council I have fought hard to retain Hepworth's Rosewall Sculpture in public hands. While we welcome yesterday's announcement, we will continue to place pressure on Royal Mail and the Government to ensure this work of art is returned to its rightful home on public display in our local town centre where we can all have the opportunity to enjoy it."*

DEMOCRACY CAMPAIGNERS THANK HOLMES FOR BACKING ARMED FORCES BILL 26 October 2005

Government's 'disgraceful' blocking action condemned

Democracy campaign group Charter 88 have written thanking Paul Holmes MP for turning up in Parliament on Friday 21st October to support the Armed Forces (Parliamentary Approval for Participation in Armed Conflict) Bill, which would require parliament's approval for the use of the country's armed forces, by making the Government obtain Parliament's authority to go to war.

The Prime Minister can currently go to war without the House of Commons' support by using the Royal Prerogative. Britain contrasts with other developed democracies such as the US in that its

Parliament does not have a formal say in the use of armed forces. Surveys have shown that the vast majority of people feel this must change.

The Private Members' Bill was backed by a cross-party team including the Rt Hon Sir Menzies Campbell MP, Rt Hon Kenneth Clarke MP, The Rt Hon William Hague MP, but the Government succeeded in 'talking out' the Bill as the number of MPs voting for it fell just 9 short of the 100 required by parliamentary rules to prevent the government blocking the Bill.

Charter 88 Co-director Ron Bailey said: "It is disgraceful that the government used parliamentary procedure to refuse to allow a direct vote on Bill. We would, however, like to thank Paul Holmes MP who attended Parliament to support this measure, which is of great constitutional importance. Private Members Bills always have a difficult passage because they are debated on Fridays, and the MPs who were in Parliament on Friday 21st had to re-arrange constituency business in order to vote for this important Bill. We would particularly like to thank the Liberal Democrats: every single Lib Dem MP has supported the Bill, and 32 of them turned out to vote. The Bill will have another chance on Friday March 10th, and we hope that all the MPs who support it will be in Parliament on the day to stand up for the rights of parliament and Democracy.

The Royal Prerogative is a relic of the past: in a parliamentary democracy parliament must have the legal right to sanction the use of armed force by this country. There is no decision more important: it can result in our fellow citizens being killed: it is a matter for parliament and Charter 88 will do all it can to ensure that this Bill becomes law."

HOLMES CHALLENGES GOVERNMENT'S SCHOOL RE-FORMS 26 October 2005

Britain's most vulnerable children to get even worse deal under Labour's plans

Yesterday in Parliament following the publication of the Schools White Paper, Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, challenged the Government's proposals for education reform.

Responding to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills' statement the local Liberal Democrat MP said:

"Last year, the Education and Skills Committee published its report on school admissions. In 100 pages, it documented the failures of the admissions system under which a largely voluntary code of practice and largely powerless and weak LEAs were letting down children with special educational needs, those receiving free school meals and children in care. Can the Secretary of State explain how, in her brave new world of completely independent competing schools and completely powerless LEAs, those children will do anything but get an even worse deal?"

Liberal Democrat Shadow Education Secretary, Edward Davey MP has criticised the Government's plans saying:

"The Government should focus on standards not structures. It is what happens in the classroom, not the boardroom that makes the difference in a child's education. The Government's proposals today won't change anything, in any classroom, anywhere in the country. Handing over admissions risks a free-for-all between schools, producing a shambles that will confuse parents, not help them. Our secondary schools need real and effective reform - a new and relevant curriculum offering choice of academic and vocational training, smaller classes and properly trained expert teachers. Parents and teachers care about pupils' literacy, not the Prime Minister's legacy."

HOLMES DONS PINK TO SUPPORT BREAST CANCER CAMPAIGN'S NATIONAL 'WEAR IT PINK®' DAY

26 October 2005

Paul Holmes MP will be wearing pink this Friday 28 October to support Breast Cancer Campaign's (BCC) award winning national 'wear it pink®' day.

Paul wants to encourage people in Chesterfield to wear an item of pink on 28 October and donate £2 to BCC - the only charity that specialises in funding independent breast cancer research throughout the UK. In demonstration of his commitment to access to effective treatment for breast cancer Paul Holmes is also supporting an Early Day Motion calling on Herceptin to be made widely available on the NHS.

Paul said: ***"I have personal experience of the trauma of breast cancer through a close family member. I support the work of the breast Cancer Campaign wholeheartedly. Every year over 13,000 people in the UK die from breast cancer, some of them will be from Chesterfield. It is for this reason that I will be wearing pink on Friday. The money raised on this day is essential for the Charity, as it will continue to help fund its breast cancer research at centres of excellence across the country."***

All types of people, companies, schools, universities, clubs, associations and local authorities throughout the UK took part in 2004, making it the most successful BCC fundraising event ever, raising over £1.3 million in just one day and winning the UK Charity Award for 'Fundraising Campaign of the Year'! The money raised goes towards valuable medical research to help the one woman in nine in the UK, who will be affected by this disease in her lifetime.

HOLMES - GOVERNMENT EDUCATION PLANS NEGLECT MOST VULNERABLE KIDS

27 October 2005

Paul Holmes has today written to Ruth Kelly demanding she clarify confusion surrounding the educational future of Britain's most vulnerable children.

Responding to his question about the Schools White Paper, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills stated that the Government's guidance on admissions for children with special educational needs, children receiving free school meals, and looked-after children will be statutory. Paul said: ***"I was astonished when the Leader of the House stated in Prime Minister's Questions yesterday that, as Ruth Kelly made 'absolutely clear', admissions guidance will remain advisory. Speaking on the floor of the House this morning she was forced to admit that the Government's admissions code will not be legally binding."***

As the July 2004 Select Committee report found, the current situation is that schools that devise their own admissions policy (which would be all schools under the trust system you propose) can, in effect, ignore the Government's admissions code as long as they can point to where they have 'considered' it in their own admissions policy."

It is an outrage that the Government's new proposals will actually worsen the present appalling situation, but that Government spin is falsely claiming the opposite. Either that or the Secretary of State does not understand her own White Paper."

"While the Government struggles through a fog of ill-thought out policy Britain's most vulnerable children are being neglected by our education system." Paul's letter reads:

Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP
Secretary of State for Education and Skills

I am writing with reference to yesterday's debate of 25 October, regarding the Schools White Paper.

The 'interruption' recorded in Column 184 of the Official Report was, as you know, made by myself and my Liberal Democrat colleague Phil Willis MP when we asked you whether regulations requiring schools to place looked-after children at the top of the list of the admissions criteria will be statutory. In response to our enquiry you replied 'Yes'.

I was therefore somewhat confused when Geoff Hoon stated today, in response to Q.21335 from Kerry McCarthy MP during Prime Minister's Questions, that:

"all schools are required to have regard to the statutory code of practice on admissions. Where complaints are made, the school adjudicator is charged with ensuring that admissions policies are in line with the code. That will continue to be the position under the proposals announced yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Skills. She made that absolutely clear, and I repeat it today."

As the July 2004 Select Committee report found, the current situation is that schools that devise their own admissions policy (which would be all schools under the trust system you propose) can, in effect, ignore the Government's admissions code as long as they can point to where they have 'considered' it in their own admissions policy.

Could you please clarify whether the Government's guidance on admissions for (1) children with special educational needs, (2) children receiving free school meals, and (3) looked-after children will be (a) advisory or (b) statutory?

Yours sincerely Paul Holmes MP

Chairman of the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party

HOLMES – SERIOUS FRAUD OFFICE INVESTIGATING SEVERN TRENT 8 Nov 2005

In January 2005 Paul Holmes MP wrote to the Environment Minister Elliot Morley MP about fraud allegations made by an employee of Severn Trent Water. This week Ofwat has announced that the Serious Fraud Office has begun an investigation into Severn Trent Water.

Since the beginning of this year Ofwat has also been conducting its own investigation into Severn Trent Water. The outcome of these investigations could lead to customers being compensated if it is found that have been overcharged. Paul Holmes MP said: ***"Severn Trent Water serves more than eight million customers across the heart of the UK including my constituency of Chesterfield. That is eight million customers who will be avidly watching the outcome of these investigations. And potentially eight million customers who could be deemed eligible for compensation."***

HOLMES CONGRATULATES LIB DEM COUNCIL ON SPECTACULAR MARKET FESTIVAL SUCCESS 8 November 2005

Last Friday MP for Chesterfield Paul Holmes, Leader of the Council Ray Russell and local Councillor Stuart Bray visited stalls selling Continental produce. In addition to the town's regular market traders, others had travelled from as far a-field as Chesterfield's twin towns of Troyes in France and Darmstadt in Germany. The festival ended triumphantly on Sunday evening with a magnificent Lantern and Samba Parade.

Paul Holmes MP said: ***"Months of hard work by the Liberal Democrat-run Borough Council, the Market Traders and many local people has culminated in Chesterfield's second spectacular annual Market Festival. The associated musical events were a huge success too. This innovative event has been enjoyed by thousands and deemed a resounding a success by all! It is no wonder that local people have rated Chesterfield Borough Council as the best council in Derbyshire and among the top 20 in the country."***

HOLMES – THOUSANDS OF LOCAL PENSIONERS MISSING OUT ON PENSION CREDIT 8 November 2005

New figures on the take-up of Pension Credit show that 2,264 pensioners in Chesterfield are missing out on money that is rightfully theirs.

Local Liberal Democrat MP, Paul Holmes said: *"It is a scandal that so many poorer older people are missing out on money they should be getting as of right. And for Chesterfield constituency, this scandal represents a loss to the local economy of as much as £96,608. In the short term, I hope everyone who is unsure about their entitlements rings the Pension Service helpline to find out if they are missing out. In the long term, we need to provide pensioners with a decent pension that isn't falling further and further below the poverty line each year."*

INCREASE IN REPOSSESSIONS SHOW DERBYSHIRE'S HOUSING BUBBLE IS CLOSE TO BURSTING 8 November 2005

Latest figures from the Department for Constitutional Affairs show a huge rise in the numbers of mortgage possession procedures issued in the county courts.

Nationally the number of possession actions entered into in the three months to September 2005 rose to 29,991, up from 19,359 from the same period in 2004 - a rise of 55%. Four possession actions are now entered into every day in Derbyshire.

The number of orders for repossession of people's homes made in the three months to September 2005 rose to 19,687 from 11,682 - a 66% jump. In Derbyshire there was a shocking 71% rise in the number of court orders made for mortgage lenders to take immediate possession of people's homes.

Analysis of the figures by the Liberal Democrats shows that these figures mean that in England and Wales a repossession order is made every seven minutes and an action is entered into every four minutes.

Commenting on the figures Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield said:

"The sharp rise in the number of homes being repossessed both in Derbyshire and across the country is very disturbing. While these figures are at low levels compared to the early 1990's there are clearly big problems ahead. Banks and building societies need to ensure that when individuals take out mortgages they are fully aware of the risks that are involved and of the relevant insurance products. At long last the Chancellor has now accepted there is a bubble in the housing market. Now he needs to recognise that for many homeowners it is sadly bursting and that he needs to take action."

HOLMES DEMANDS PENSIONS JUSTICE FOR WOMEN AND CARERS 08 November 2005

Welcoming the launch of the Women and Pensions Network on Monday 7th November Paul Holmes MP is calling for the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to end the failure of the current pension system for women and carers.

The local Liberal Democrat MP's call comes after a report published last week by the Department for Work and Pensions showed that only by 2025 will men and women have similar levels of entitlement to the basic state pension, and this is partly because the levels of entitlement amongst

men are expected to fall! At present, only 24% of women retiring today are entitled to a full basic State Pension on the basis of their own contributions, compared to just less than 90% of men.

Unless there is radical change, most of the 9,177 women in Chesterfield aged between 45 and 59 will continue to be effectively discriminated against by the pensions system, leaving them with poorer pensions when they retire.

Paul Holmes MP said: *"These figures show that John Hutton, the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, has a huge challenge ahead of him. For the millions of women already retired and living in poverty because of the injustice of the current pension system and for the millions of women and carers who will be retiring over the next 20 years, urgent and radical action must be taken. Rather than continuing to tinker with the system of National Insurance contributions, the Government should establish a Citizen's Pension, where entitlement is based on long-term UK residency."*

HOLMES WELCOMES THE 'FATHER OF THE RAILWAYS' TO CHESTERFIELD 8 November 2005

Local MP Paul Holmes has welcomed a statue of 'Father of the Railways' George Stephenson to Chesterfield.

The bronze statue of the great railway pioneer has been unveiled at Chesterfield Railway Station to mark the completion of improvements to the station. Paul said: ***"This magnificent sculpture by the renowned artist Stephen Hicklin was provided as part of Chesterfield Borough Council's Percent for Art Policy, under which developers of schemes costing more than £1m provide one per cent of the cost for a piece of art. George Stephenson and I are old friends. I came to Chesterfield in 1979 to teach history to local children. Naturally I taught them about Stephenson. At first my wife and I lived next door to his home at Tapton House. And I now live just round the corner from his burial place inside Holy Trinity Church in Chesterfield."***

HOLMES - LibDemNHSWatch.com WILL PROVIDE TRUE PICTURE OF NHS 15 Nov 2005

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, has helped to launch a new website to help paint a true picture of the National Health Service. The site is designed to help the Liberal Democrats listen to the views and concerns of NHS staff, patients and members of the public.

The site, which can be found at LibDemNHSWatch.com, includes a letter from the party's health spokesman, Steve Webb MP, who writes about various Government reforms of the health service. Chairman of the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party, Paul Holmes MP said: "In Chesterfield we're lucky to have a dedicated team of healthcare professionals. But much of the high quality healthcare we have in this area is despite the Government and not because of it. To help improve the NHS, and to assist my fellow Liberal Democrats and I in holding the Government to account, we want to hear from patients who have difficulty accessing treatment, and from professionals prevented from providing services the community needs. We also want to hear from you if you have had good treatment and seen good things happening that should be happening everywhere. Currently, there are few outlets for people to tell their stories or expose issues that point to larger problems. The Government would rather that these stories do not see the light of day. We disagree. LibDemNHSWatch.com will allow us to identify which NHS reforms are working, which targets distort clinical priorities and which issues those inside the 'Westminster bubble' really need to know about."

Constituents of Paul Holmes MP should of course still contact his office directly (01246 234879) if they have a particular personal issue which needs taking up with the health authorities.

HOLMES CALLS ON TAX CREDIT OVERPAYMENT FAMILIES TO COMPLAIN TO OMBUDSMAN 10 November 2005

Paul Holmes MP is calling on anyone who has had a tax credit overpayment arising from official error to contact him so he can take the complaint to the Parliamentary Ombudsman.

In Chesterfield constituency, there are likely to be around 6,600 families who have had a tax credit overpayment since 2003.

Paul Holmes says: “Over the last few weeks, it has become quite clear that Government Ministers are behaving in a grossly complacent way over the recovery of tax credit overpayments. They are recklessly ignoring the clear statement by the Parliamentary Ombudsman that automatic recovery of tax credit overpayments is ‘systemic maladministration’. **The time has come for everyone who has had an overpayment to put pressure on the Government to act fairly and responsibly.** If you have had an overpayment contact my office and we will look to refer your complaint to the Ombudsman. “Because of the Ombudsman’s statement, it is likely that she will uphold a complaint of maladministration in each and every case, purely on the grounds that the tax credit was recovered automatically.

TENANTS AND COUNCILLORS GAGGED IN DEBATE ON FUTURE OF THEIR HOUSING 18 November 2005

The Government’s Housing Minister has today admitted that representatives sitting on the boards of Registered Social Landlords are legally obliged to put landlords’ interests *before* that of tenants.

In response to parliamentary questions asked by Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, Yvette Cooper MP has stated that whether members of these housing boards are tenants or councillors they “owe a fiduciary duty to act in the best interests of the organisation”.

Local Liberal Democrat MP Paul Holmes said:

“This clearly prohibits members of housing boards from representing the interests of tenants if these clash with those of the Registered Social Landlord. Yet the Government soft soaps opposition to transfer by saying councillors and tenants will be able to look after tenants’ interest on these new boards!

“Far-reaching decisions are being made about the future of council housing in Chesterfield and across the country.

“The Government is denying councils the direct investment in their housing that would enable them to meet its ‘decent homes’ target. It is instead offering three options for additional investment that would shift control and accountability away from tenants and elected councillors, towards market forces and into private hands.

“It is a travesty that tenants and elected councillors are being excluded from representing their views on the boards of organisations that are discussing the future of their homes. Tenants deserve a voice in a fair and balanced debate. This democratic deficit must be rectified.”

BLAIR ADMITS CSA CANNOT PERFORM ITS TASK, SO SCRAP IT SAYS HOLMES

17 November 2005

Yesterday Charles Kennedy, Leader of the Liberal Democrats, forced the Prime Minister to admit that the problems with the CSA are “fundamental” and hinted that the CSA might be scrapped.

Kennedy pointed out that in 1998 the Prime Minister had said the CSA was in need of 'urgent reform' but that today, for every £1 spent by the CSA on its own bureaucracy, only £1.85 is raised. The Prime Minister then called into question the future of the CSA saying that “the agency itself is not properly suited to carry out that task.”

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield and Chairman of the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party said:

“The CSA is an appalling example of Government ineptitude. The Agency have made 35,558 payments for mal-administration, some worth between £10,000 and £50,000, since December 2001. Unpaid payments now stand at £1.7billion. This represents just the tip of the iceberg of mal-administration and incompetence.

“The CSA must be scrapped. Its function should be transferred to the Inland Revenue so that it better serves those who are trying to pay their maintenance and properly pursues those who aren't.”

PAUL BACKS BILLS TO TACKLE CLIMATE CHANGE

15 November 2005

Paul Holmes was in the House of Commons last Friday to support two private member's bills that aim to tackle climate change and fuel poverty.

Mark Lazarowicz MP's bill *Climate Change and Sustainable Energy Bill* aims to increase the number of homes with solar panels and wind turbines. With vital support from the Liberal Democrat benches this passed its second reading. However, a second bill to try to force ministers to take more climate change action by reforming planning laws failed to get any further after being effectively derailed by Conservative MP Eric Forth.

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield said:

"The Climate Change and Sustainable Energy Bill is a vital measure. Emissions of CO2 continue to increase and rising energy prices will mean that even more people will suffer from cold homes this winter. This Bill contains practical measures to deal with both problems, including cuts in council tax for people who generate their own electricity using technology such as a micro-wind turbines or solar panels"

Ron Bailey, Organiser of the Sustainable Energy Partnership, which represents major environmental and 'fuel poverty' NGOs, has today written thanking Paul Holmes MP for being present in Parliament, saying: ***"We appreciate that it is difficult for MPs to be in parliament on a Friday, so we are especially grateful to Paul Holmes MP for being in the House. This is exactly the example that MPs need to set – action not just fine words. We thank Paul Holmes"***

HOLMES SLAMS GOVERNMENT'S CIVIL SERVICE SHAMBLES

2 December 2005

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, has today slammed the Government for placing vulnerable people at risk by pursuing ill-judged Civil Service reforms.

Speaking this afternoon to members of the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents civil servants, Paul Holmes said:

“The Government’s irresponsible Civil Service reform measures are fuelled by a damaging and short-sighted desire to outbid Tory cuts. The Prime Minister’s pursuit of random 20% staff cuts, his reliance on distant call centres and failing computer software, is placing vulnerable people at severe risk.

“Chesterfield’s Citizen’s Advice Bureau has told me how developments in the delivery of public services are worsening problems both for local people and advice workers.

“The Liberal Democrats want to see a Civil Service that operates efficiently, productively and to the highest standard, and whose impartiality is valued and protected. The Civil Service must not be frozen in time, but reform should be founded on these principles, evidence-based and conducted in consultation with staff.”

PCS Conference Speech 2 December 2005

Paul gave his speech at today’s PCS conference on ‘The Civil Service: Alternative Visions for the Future’, at the DTI conference centre in central London. The full text of the speech follows:

The Liberal Democrats believe that the Civil Service must be politically impartial at every level, from the highest rank of Whitehall mandarins to the staff at the front desk who deal with policy implementation and service delivery.

This has been a fundamental principle of the British Civil Service since the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854. Giving evidence to the Select Committee on Public Administration in 2004, Paul Tyler – then a Lib Dem MP and now a peer, argued that it is “essential that civil servants should be responsible ultimately to Parliament, not merely to the government of the day. This should guarantee accountability – through elected representatives – to the public, and also ensure equality of access for those representatives. The UK local government tradition of accountability and access is a much better model than the US emphasis of politicalisation, with major changes in each change of administration.”

Sir Robin Mountfield, formerly Permanent Secretary at the Cabinet Office, told the Government in response to its consultation, that Civil Service principles “have been under increasing pressure for some years” from governments of both main parties. He gave a number of examples, including allegations that in the early 1990s there was Ministerial influence on senior Home Office appointments, and says that there are “strong and disturbing signs” that “civil servants are increasingly excluded by Ministers and special advisers from the crucial stages of the policy formulation process” which reduces “the extent to which policy proposals are subjected to rigorous analysis and impartial challenge”.

According to Sir Robin, the conclusions of the Butler Inquiry show that civil servants were drawn into “prejudicial relationships with Ministers and political advisers” in the months before the war with Iraq.

The Liberal Democrats fully supported the Civil Service Bill drafted by the Public Administration Select Committee in 2004. In the same year the Liberal Democrat Lord Lester of Herne Hill introduced a Private Member’s Bill that put forward similar proposals, including reform of the royal prerogative. In our General Election manifesto we committed ourselves to introducing a Civil Service Act to act as a barrier to politicization, and protect the independence and integrity of the Civil Service. We then cemented this commitment at our Federal Conference in September. Such legislation is vital to “protect and enhance the independence of the professional civil servant – as a public rather than a political servant – in the face of the unprecedented party pressure currently experienced.”

Maintaining the impartiality of the Civil Servant is one major issue. Other fundamental issues however are the size, efficiency, quality of service delivery and value for money offered by the Civil Service. There cannot be any case for standing still and saying this is how it must always remain.

In looking at Civil Service reform we have to ask *firstly* are there some functions which must be delivered by public servants for reasons such as impartiality, accountability, equity of service delivery, or state and public security? In short, are there areas which require a public service ethos rather than a profit motive - in the way that the police or armed forces clearly do? Where there are such services we must constantly review how effectively they are being delivered – taxpayers' money is in short supply and there are many other good uses to which it can be put. Where there are better ways of delivering the service – such as relocation from London or using outside expertise and providers - these moves must be evidence based and with regard to the principles I have already laid out. First let's look at:

1. Real value for money and not spurious efficiency savings based on macho headcount cuts and spurious reliance on call centres and flawed software - that either don't work, or deliver a worse service in reality.

- Liberal Democrat Shadow Chancellor Vince Cable argued in a recent pamphlet that “the headcount target approach to public services reform is crass and probably counter-productive. Numerous private corporation managers have tried to impress their shareholders in this way. However, the experience has often been that useful but humble frontline staff get the sack while top management remains insulated from cuts or rewards itself for leading the process. The fundamental flaw in the ‘headcount’ approach is that it puts the cart before the horse; downsizing government while avoiding the question of what government should do less of. At best, such reforms can cut inefficiency and raise productivity but they can also diminish the quality of service as is currently happened in the DWP.”

- My local Citizen's Advice Bureau contacted me just this week to tell me how developments in the delivery of public services are worsening problems both for local people and advice workers. For example:

o Saying “we have seen severe financial hardship resulting from communications difficulties and mistakes” resulting from dealing with distant telephone call centres.

o Or -“The Child Support Agency, which for Chesterfield is administered in Belfast, continues to cause serious problems for many people.”

- The use of the private company EDS to provide the information technology systems for the Child Support Agency, at a cost of £1/2 billion to the taxpayer, has proved disastrous. New figures obtained by Liberal Democrat Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, David Laws MP show that the CSA have made 35,558 payments for maladministration, some worth between £10,000 and £50,000, since December 2001.

Despite this abominable track record the DWP has renewed EDS's contract saying that, in line with Gershon efficiency recommendations, they will be saving money.

- The Government's technological efficiency ‘improvements’ at Jobcentre Plus have resulted in the installation of a new computerised call system to which one in three callers are unable to get through. People are also waiting for up to six weeks to get benefits because processing centres, who are suffering as a result of efficiency staffing cuts, cannot keep up with the workload. And while meeting Rethink in Chesterfield a constituent with mental health problems told me how she ended up smashing the free-phone at Jobcentre Plus on the desk in frustration at trying to cope with talking to a remote call centre instead of to a real person face to face.

- Frontline cuts to the Pensions Service staff would mean fewer Pensioners accessing Pension Credit and remaining in the one and a half million who currently live in poverty as a result.

- Earlier this year Atos Origin, the private company contracted by the Government to conduct medical examinations for benefits claimants, announced the imminent closure of 24 Medical Examining Centres across the country, including both of those in Derbyshire – in Derby and Chesterfield. Anne McGuire explained that these closures were being made to achieve “improved standards of service and better value for money for the taxpayer”. The closure of Derbyshire’s centres would have forced those claiming benefits to travel as far as Sheffield, Nottingham or Manchester if they required a medical assessment. Being unable to work due to illness or incapacity is difficult and traumatic enough without having to travel long distances to remote assessment centres. Following intensive lobbying by MPs, union representatives and the local interest groups, the decision to close Derbyshire’s examining centres has been reversed. However, the effect of the Government’s efficiency savings will still be felt deeply by vulnerable people across the country who attend the 11 centres that are still being closed.

2. Accountability

- I recently wrote to Health Minister Rosie Winterton regarding the closure of a wing at a day hospital in my constituency. By way of reply she stated that “NHS Foundation Trusts are now directly accountable to their local communities and to Parliament. Ministers and Department of Health officials are no longer involved in the day to day management of Foundation Trusts, which have independent status within the NHS.” So accountability in fact gets lost as Ministers no longer give answers and relevant organisations plead commercial confidentiality.

- The same was apparent during my 4 year battle to hold the Learning and Skills Council to account while on the Education and Skills Select Committee.

- To cut 50 jobs the DTI considered privatizing its export control organization –a move that was thankfully abandoned following an effective campaign by the PCS. Hiving off the unit would have affected the accountability of the export licensing process, hindered confidential information sharing between states on arms transfers and given rise to potential conflicts of interest. A report by ASE management consultants, commissioned by the government and released under the Freedom of Information Act, warned that a decision to place the organisation in private hands may have even required a change in the law.

- In December the Government published its plans for introducing contestability to the Probation Service. The Government’s plans will fragment the Probation Service, leading to less co-operation within the criminal justice system and, as Charles Clarke has acknowledged, resulting in the ending of a national and local Probation Service. The Liberal Democrat Shadow Home Secretary, Mark Oaten, is a key supporter of an EDM – also supported by John McDonnell - that “urges the Government not to franchise or privatise all or part of the tasks of the National Probation Service.” The Government fails to provide evidence to substantiate its claim that these proposals will reduce the current appalling 60% re-offending rate. Meanwhile Private Prisons have to reveal only a fraction of the information that Home Office run prisons are required to produce.

3. Impartiality in delivery of service

Could also be a problem with more outsourcing and privatisation. For example various Faith Groups have some beliefs which would discriminate against sectors of the population (women, gays, single mothers, those seeking pregnancy and contraceptive advice and services). How can this be squared with the need for providing impartial services to all if Faith Groups take on more of a role in, for example, delivering DWP or Health services?

In conclusion, the Government has determined that contestability and the introduction of competition between public, private and voluntary sector providers, through market based mechanisms, is the principle that should underpin public sector reform in its third term. It is driving forward its principle of competition and contestability, without evidence that it will improve performance, without consultation and without paying due attention to the success or otherwise of the wholesale outsourcing of public service contracts to the private sector.

Liberal Democrat vision for the future of the Civil Service

The Liberal Democrats want to see a Civil Service that operates efficiently, productively and to the highest standard, and whose impartiality is valued and protected. We do believe that the Civil Service and its functions cannot be a fossilised entity – frozen in time – because ‘this is how it has always been.’

The pursuit of value for money, such as relocation out of expensive London locations where possible, makes sense. Making more use of effective and proven organisations like the Shaw Trust to help disabled people into work is a major plank of the Liberal Democrat Welfare to Work policy that I wrote as Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions. Lib Dem policy is to close down much of the DTI because we think many of its functions are unnecessary and the money can be better spent elsewhere.

But, reform of the Civil Service should go hand in hand with a Civil Service Act. We need to maintain a Civil Service that is not only efficient but democratically accountable and impartial.

And we must not go down the Government road of random 20% staff cuts and reliance on distant call centres and failing computer software, which make service delivery much worse rather than improving it. Any change must be justified, evidence based and proved to work. Not based upon an electoral contest to outbid the Tories and please the Daily Mail.

CHANCELLOR MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO BREAK PENSIONS CONSENSUS

2 Dec 2005

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield and Chairman of the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party, today warned the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, against blocking pensions reform away from the means-tested model following this week’s publication of the Turner report.

Paul Holmes said he would seek to question the Chancellor during Treasury Questions in the House of Commons next Thursday: “*The Turner report represents an unmissable opportunity to secure much-needed reform of Britain’s complex and inadequate pensions system. Lord Turner has reflected a very broad national consensus by proposing a simpler and improved state pension, linked to earnings, rather than the current reliance on means-testing and complexity. “The Prime Minister must not allow one man, Gordon Brown, to veto pensions reform. It is simply unthinkable that we could end up with 75% of pensioners on means-tested benefits, as Gordon Brown seems to think acceptable. In addition, the spread of means-testing can only erode incentives for private saving.*

On behalf of people in Chesterfield I intend to question the Chancellor as to whether he will stand in the way of these essential reforms, in the interests of preserving the bewilderingly complex means-testing system he created — or whether he will stand up for a simpler and fairer pensions deal for all.”

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Speaking this afternoon to members of the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents civil servants, Paul Holmes said:

***“The Government’s irresponsible Civil Service reform measures are fuelled by a damaging and short-sighted desire to outbid Tory cuts. The Prime Minister’s pursuit of random 20% staff cuts, his reliance on distant call centres and failing computer software, is placing vulnerable people at severe risk. “Chesterfield’s Citizen’s Advice Bureau has told me how developments in the delivery of public services are worsening problems both for local people and advice workers.*”**

“The Liberal Democrats want to see a Civil Service that operates efficiently, productively and to the highest standard, and whose impartiality is valued and protected. The Civil Service must not be frozen in time, but reform should be founded on these principles, evidence-based and conducted in consultation with staff.”

HOLMES SUPPORTS CHRISTMAS CALL FOR CURB ON RIP-OFF LENDERS 6 Dec 2005

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, has joined the National Housing Federation and Debt on Our Doorstep to call on the Government and high street banks to provide a realistic alternative to doorstep lenders, who will bring misery to thousands of people as they struggle to pay for Christmas.

Almost 2 million people on low incomes are denied access to basic financial services. They are often driven to exploitative doorstep lenders who charge crippling interest rates, which averaged 177% APR last year. Borrowers are encouraged to take out top-up loans as they struggle to make repayments. What begins as a £100 loan to pay for Christmas presents can escalate into a debt of thousands within months.

Paul Holmes said: ***“I know that many people in Chesterfield are being targeted and ripped off by doorstep lenders, paying way over the top for credit. They are being hit hard in the run up to Christmas when it’s especially difficult to make ends meet.”***

David Orr, Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation, said:

“We are campaigning for a fair deal for low income households. We think it’s outrageous that the poorest in our communities are the target of unscrupulous lenders. We’re calling on the government to put a stop to it.”

Niall Cooper, Vice-Chair of Debt on our Doorstep, said: ***“Although there is now widespread awareness of the harmful effects of extortionate and predatory lending in poor communities, the Government’s response to date has been woefully inadequate. Unless it is substantially strengthened, the Consumer Credit Bill currently going through Parliament will fail to provide vulnerable consumers with the protection they desperately need.”***

HOLMES CALLS FOR EASIER ACCESS TO TREATMENT FOR FATAL LUNG DISORDER 18 December 2005

Paul Holmes MP has joined the UK Pulmonary Hypertension Association (PHA) to help mark its fifth anniversary by calling for easier access to treatment. Together with patients and doctors they will be lobbying the Government to launch a long-term funding programme to ensure that patients have access to the treatments they need.

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, said:

“Pulmonary hypertension (PH) is a rare and often fatal lung disorder which afflicts around 100,000 to 200,000 people worldwide and has a worse prognosis than most cancers, with a mortality of 40% per year.

“The condition is frequently misdiagnosed because its symptoms are often confused with other pulmonary and respiratory illnesses. Patients often progress to a late disease stage before they are accurately diagnosed, which increases the urgency for therapies to be easily accessible.

“I strongly support the PHA in its efforts to secure a long-term funding commitment from the Department of Health guaranteeing patients swift access to the treatments they require.”

Kay Atkin, a PH patient, explained:

“At first I started feeling really short of breath, but thought that it was more likely to be due to stress than any serious medical condition. My GP and a specialist could detect no more than marginal asthma. But my breathlessness wouldn't go away, despite using the inhalers. I ended up in hospital with a thrombosis and pulmonary emboli. Only then did I get referred to a specialist cardiologist at Papworth Hospital. By the time my illness was correctly identified it was already so advanced and severe that I had to give up work.”

PLAY IT SAFE WITH GAS IN 2006 21 Dec 2005

Paul Holmes, today called on constituents to protect themselves and their families by making a New Year's Resolution to play it safe with gas in 2006.

The local Liberal Democrat MP said:

“I am pleased to help CORGI in its campaign to ensure that people have their gas appliances maintained by a CORGI-registered installer.

“Carbon Monoxide poisoning is entirely preventable but can be a silent killer in the home.

“I call on all my constituents to make a pledge to have their gas appliances checked by a CORGI-registered installer in 2006.”

CORGI and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents will jointly launch an advertising campaign in January 2006, warning people of the dangers of Carbon Monoxide poisoning.

DERBYSHIRE POLICE UNDER-FUNDED AND UNDER THREAT

21 Dec 2005

Paul Holmes has today slammed the Government for failing to adequately protect his constituents from crime by first under-funding and then threatening to abolish Derbyshire Constabulary.

Commenting ahead of today's debate in the House of Commons regarding the restructuring of the country's 43 police forces into fewer, bigger forces – which could see Derbyshire Police Force merged into a region-wide East Midlands' force - Paul Holmes MP said:

“The Government is railroading through the merger of police authorities across the UK at an estimated cost of £500-600 million to the taxpayer.

“As Thatcher did before him, Blair has continued to grossly under-fund Derbyshire Police Force. This year the Government estimated that Derbyshire Police needed a grant increase of £9.6million but awarded them just £3.3million or 3.4% compared to an average across England and Wales of 4.75% over the next two years.

“The Labour Government’s under-funding is forcing Derbyshire Constabulary to make a staggering £10 million worth of cuts from 2005-‘08. The Police Authority is warning that this will force a reduction in police officer numbers, withdraw resources from neighbourhood policing and reduce opportunities to make full use of advances in forensic science which would improve detection rates.

“The Chief Constable, David Coleman has written to me saying ‘there is now a serious risk that the public of Derbyshire will experience a reduction in service in the future’.”

“To force through drastic and costly restructuring of the country’s policing in just three months is utterly undemocratic and will further devastate a struggling service.

“Today I have written to the Home Secretary urging him to reconsider his destructive proposals for restructure and award Derbyshire Police Force the funding its hard-working officers and my constituents deserve.”