



SARAH WOLLASTON

Totnes MP Sarah Wollaston brings her fortnightly diary

Great to have a government that listens

THIS week in Parliament the Government has responded to the consultation on the reform of punishment, rehabilitation and sentencing of offenders, together with plans to reform legal aid.

The most controversial proposal had been to offer greater reductions in sentences to those who pleaded guilty at the earliest possible stage. It was clear that people who had been victims of crime and the public in general thought this was a bad idea, and the Government has again listened and decided not to increase the existing 'discount' of up to a third of sentences.

We have seen a refreshing change in the way that government operates. It is hard to imagine Gordon Brown actually listening to a consultation let alone putting in place the wishes of the public backed up by experts.

I was pleased to see the Government taking seriously

the issue of drug use in prisons and the scandal of re-offending rates. The Coalition also intends to toughen the laws on squatting and clarify the law on self-defence as so often it seems that the victims of crimes such as burglary can end up being treated as the criminals.

Legal aid reform will be painful but the problem is that taxpayers are now spending £39 per head on legal aid, more than anywhere in the world apart from Northern Ireland, and it just can't be afforded. As a result, legal aid will no longer be routinely available for most private family law 'civil' cases or to fund repeated immigration appeals.

It will not affect the access to justice in the most serious cases so anyone who faces loss of their liberty or custody of their children, as well as victims of domestic violence or imminent eviction, will continue to have access to legal aid.

One of my main concerns has been the potential impact on our Citizens Advice

Bureau, which receive a great deal of funding through legal aid contracts. The service and care provided by our CAB volunteers must be recognised and the Minister for legal aid, Jonathan Djanogly has agreed to meet with our CAB to see what can be done to help.

Learning Disability Week

Last week in Totnes and this week in Parliament I met up with people with learning difficulties, carers and advocates to hear about two pressing issues.

The first and most shocking is the level of abuse that people with learning disabilities suffer and how this is making some people feel frightened to use transport or even go shopping. Name calling and sometimes physical abuse are everyone's business and will not stop unless passers by step in when they see it happening.

Most attacks go unreported and Devon's Keeping Safe scheme aims to make it easier for victims and witnesses to report bullying and abuse and

also to make it easy to identify safe shops for victims to go to if they are in difficulties. If you are interested in taking part then please look at the Keeping Safe website.

The meetings also highlighted support for the plans to allow all disabled people to have personal budgets so that they can decide where they live and who gives them support. It is time to move away from institutions providing for people with disabilities. One person summed it up very well by making the point that most people can choose who they live with so why should that be denied to people with learning difficulties.

Brixham Trawler Race

It was a great to watch the Brixham Trawler Race from on board the Liberty Lass with skipper Ashley Lane.

Congratulations to Alan Healey, Pam Evans, John and Sheila Anderson and the whole committee for another fantastic celebration of Brixham's fishing fleet and for

raising money in aid of the fishermen's mission and other local charities.

Torbay Development Agency

I met this week with the Torbay Development Agency for an update on the Brixham regeneration programme. I have had several letters asking whether I support the Tesco town centre development.

For me the big question is whether such a development will increase visitors to the rest of the town centre. There is evidence that if it is in the central site with every effort made to improve access to Fore Street and provide convenient and increased town centre car parking spaces then it could improve spending in adjacent shops.

Experience in Newton Abbot has shown how a supermarket in a town centre site with good parking facilities increased footfall at a previously fading end of town. The greater threat to Brixham would be another out of town shopping

development. As with all planning decisions, it is the opinions of local people and councillors that will matter the most.

SURGERIES

IF you wish to meet with me to discuss your problems, please take note that I will be holding surgeries on Friday, July 1, in Totnes from 4pm to 6pm; Saturday, July 2, in Totnes from 10.30am to noon; Friday, July 22, in Kingsbridge from 10.30am to 12.30pm; and Wednesday, July 27, in Brixham from 4.30pm to 6.30pm. Today I will be at a community meeting in Townstal. To make an appointment, please call Nina Smith on 01803 868378.