



CHRIS STEPHENS MP



A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER

After last year's election and ongoing Brexit saga, who could have possibly predicted a year like 2020?

It has been a year like no other, filled with challenges, sadness and loss; with the scale of the situation, we all were facing hitting home in March when lockdown began.

People understandably were scared and faced uncertainty and not surprisingly they looked to their elected representatives for help and guidance.

For the first few months of lockdown, my office had a flood of requests on a scale not seen before for help, advice, guidance and just general reassurance. All this while trying to adapt to a new way of working and helping people ourselves.

With working from home becoming the default position, we had to very quickly shift almost entirely to email to deal with constituents - latterly adding phone calls once we were able to sort the phone line. I could no longer hold meetings in person, and our collaborative working with each other, organisations and constituents was moved to video calls like zoom.

Specific circumstances and the scale of some of the challenges have themselves been a new barrier to overcome. People stranded in countries abroad unable to get home, elderly constituents unable to access food shopping and employers reluctant to comply with guidance to close.

The pandemic itself also adds weight to the significance of the queries were facing given the stakes involved. My office has always given advice, but this year more than ever that advice may have had a direct impact on people's health, or their livelihoods, and the weight of that responsibility was definitely felt by all within my office.

However, my team have not been phased one bit and have been phenomenal with the support they have given to constituents across Glasgow South West and I can't thank them enough.

This year they have dealt with 3500 registered cases and handled nearly 10,000 emails. That is not including the thousands of calls throughout the year where they have listened and given advice to constituents.

I am lucky to have the best constituency office team in the UK and I thank them all for their supreme efforts this year.



THREEHILLS

Community Supermarket

GLASGOW SOUTH WEST SET FOR FIRST COMMUNITY SUPERMARKET IN SCOTLAND

Over the last year since my re-election, alongside local organisations and in partnership with Feeding Britain, I have spearheaded plans to deliver a new project in Glasgow South West to help tackle food insecurity.

The Threehills Citizens' Supermarket is set to launch in 2021 in Glasgow South West and it will reduce the financial pressure on households in our communities who are struggling to pay the bills and put food on the table.

This food insecurity project will provide immediate relief for anyone on low incomes by improving their access to affordable and nutritious food.

The citizens' supermarket will deliver choice in shopping for food in a standard supermarket environment, with high-quality food being subsidised to make it financially more affordable.

Piloted at several locations across the UK, Citizens' Supermarkets have helped to ease people out of poverty with dignity and respect while preventing the need to access the services of a foodbank.

We have now located a site for the project on Nitshill Road and is named "Threehills" after three of the local communities it will serve – Nitshills, Priesthill and Househill, although it will be there to be utilised by anyone across the constituency who needs it.

As well as a shopping area, the supermarket will include a café and a community room where partner organisations will offer specialised help and support to address any underlying issues which may have left someone in financial difficulty or vulnerable to food insecurity.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, I am over the moon with the progress on the project in the last twelve. Firstly, securing funding from Feeding Britain to employ two development workers and more recently the securing additional funding to get a refrigerated van which is now being utilised by organisations under G53 Together to support people with food delivery during the pandemic.

The development workers have also now got in place a company who will do the refit of the venue on Nitshill Road, as well as securing a further £85k in funding which will go to the initial costs of the supermarket set-up and operation.

TIME FOR A RECOVERY UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME (UBI)



When this global pandemic ends, we will be faced with a huge economic recovery, which is likely to be long and hard.

That is why I am convinced more than ever that a Universal Basic Income (UBI) will help economic stability and lead to increased spending in local communities, supporting businesses and the wider economic recovery.

During 2020, people have understandably been fearful of the risks posed by the virus, both health and economic, and we cannot underplay the anxiety associated with wondering how to pay the bills – sadly a worry that many have been confronted with during a decade long of Tory austerity.

This financial anxiety, however, is something that more people have been forced to confront this year. How to pay their rent, or what happens when the mortgage holiday is over?

Of course, for some the very welcome UK Government Job Retention Scheme has been a lifeline – although a lifeline which has all too often been threatened to be removed, thankfully we have now had it confirmed it will be in place until March 2021.

However, as we have found out those who have received Government support have been the lucky ones, albeit with still real challenges making up that missing 20% monthly income. For those seasonal workers, those in the gig economy, freelancers and those newly self-employed they have been forced to rely on the woefully inadequate Universal Credit.

While sitting on the Work and Pensions Select Committee, I have spent the last few years hearing evidence about the Universal Credit not being enough to support families and doesn't scratch the surface of living costs.

We need a solution to tackle poverty and the inequality which that leads to. A Universal Basic Income (UBI) I believe could be the start of the journey, and the need is now.

If the UK Government had acted at the start of lockdown, a UBI would have supported families and individuals through this global pandemic and helped many cope in a period of economic inactivity.

As the scale of the crisis became clear it was essential, we acted to make sure we emerged from lockdown a fairer more resilient society and economy.

Sadly the UK Government did not listen to calls from me and others to act earlier on this, however, as we go forward-facing a potentially damaging recession and the economic shocks we must have income protection for people in the form of a Recovery Universal Basic Income – a regular cash payment to every person in the UK.

This payment must be sufficient to provide security for people and offer an income floor that nobody is allowed to fall through, and which we can have a springboard to recovery.

I will continue to raise the need for Universal Basic Income to be brought forward and am very pleased that this is now something the Work and Pensions Select Committee is now taking evidence on. And, I will continue to work within that remit to push for this to be given full consideration.

The simple point is, that to regain any semblance of normal life, within any reasonably acceptable timescale, we are going to need to commit to structural support for our people. A universal basic income is the right way to make sure that the path to recovery is both achievable and fair.

COVID DIDN'T STOP OUR MACMILLAN COFFEE MORNING

I am pleased to say we did not let COVID stop me and Humza Yousaf MSP from hosting our annual Macmillan Coffee Morning.

Of course, the restrictions on social gatherings did mean we had to do things a little different this year, however that did not deter people from joining us at our virtual event or donating to support this wonderful cause.

We did not set a target to fundraise this year, however if we did, I am sure we would have surpassed anything we would have hoped to have made thanks to the wonderful donations by all of you.

This year, we were able to raise £530 which will go towards supporting families and individuals dealing with the life-changing cancer diagnosis.

Thank you to everyone who came along and who donated.



HOME OFFICE'S HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT CONTINUES

For anyone who has been paying attention, it will be little surprise that this year Boris Johnson's Brexiteer Government has continued its openly hostile rhetoric and actions towards asylum seekers and refugees.

In March, we saw men, women and children asylum seekers pulled from their homes and moved into wholly inadequate hotels without risk assessments being carried out. As we saw in Glasgow, these actions had a devastating impact on many health and wellbeing of those affected, sadly with truly heart-breaking consequences.

With my Glasgow colleagues we had repeatedly challenged the UK Government of the dangers of the actions they were taking, sadly our warnings were not listened to or acted on.

We have also seen the tragic stories that have emerged in the English Channel over recent months and the inherent xenophobia at the very heart of the Tory Party is yet a further example of the Home Office hostile environment. The Government has been deliberately stalling and delaying the reintroduction of the UK's refugee resettlement scheme which has pushed people to make these dangerous journeys.



But it is not just about the UK Government changing its rhetoric, it must also seek to empower those currently in the UK waiting on decisions.

This year, I called on the UK Government to change their immigration policy to allow asylum seekers the right to work, in a debate on 19 October 2020 at Westminster. Shockingly it was the Labour Government in 2002 changed immigration rules to prohibit asylum seekers to work lawfully.

SNP are clear that the ban on working for those in the asylum system makes no sense for anyone. The UK approach leaves people frozen in poverty while they wait, often years, for an asylum decision. People who have risked everything to find safety should have the best chance of contributing to our society and integrating into our communities.

SNP MPs at Westminster will continue to speak up for people seeking asylum and for Scotland to be given the powers it needs to create an approach to immigration that reflects our values as an outward looking open nation.

DWP MUST INTRODUCE UNIVERSAL CREDIT GRANTS INSTEAD OF LOANS

This year, my colleagues and I have ramped up the pressure on the UK Government to introduce grants instead of advance loans and scrap the five-week wait under Universal Credit after organisations reiterated support for the proposal.

The growing pressures follows a Work and Pensions Committee session where there was overwhelming support from witnesses – including from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Citizens Advice Bureau – for the UK government to make Universal Credit advance payments non-repayable grants instead of loans to prevent people from falling into, or further into, debt.

The UK Government has said it fears that introducing advance payment grants for Universal Credit could see an increase in fraudulent claims. Alongside colleagues in Parliament, I have proposed a solution to this, whereby advance payments become non-repayable grants once the claimant has been deemed eligible for Universal Credit. This would take away the need to reverse the five-week wait, which the DWP has said would be “operationally challenging.”

I have repeatedly argued that the advance payment could be determined on a “slide and scale” basis – dependent on need – but all would receive an upfront payment to see them through until the first Universal Credit payment.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that a short-term solution for people would be to pay some form of non-repayable grant upfront after finding that 70% of surveyed claimants who apply for an advance payment said they face difficulties as a result of that loan, with impacts occurring long after that first payment. Changing Lives, the Trussell Trust, Leonard Cheshire, StepChange, the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Child Poverty Action Group also made clear that they supported the introduction of grants instead of loans as advance payments.

At the committee I was pleased to see the charities and organisations in attendance overwhelmingly in support for the UK Government to implement the proposal to make advance payments non-repayable grants instead of loans.

TORY POWER GRAB ON SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

Boris Johnson spent most of last year droning on about Brexit and taking back control from the EU, and now have claiming devolution is a “disaster” and trying to take control over Scotland too.

The UK International Market Bill, where the Tories a bill where Tories were quite happy to break international law, is a shameless power grab on Scotland's democratic powers and outright assault on devolution.

In 2014, we were told that powers in Scotland would never be altered without consent of Holyrood, however the bill will be imposed on Scotland despite an overwhelming rejection of the bill in the Scottish Parliament.

The bill currently going through UK Parliament will put in place an unelected and unaccountable Westminster body who will be able to overrule the Scottish Parliament decisions.

This is exactly what the Internal Market Bill aims to do – take power from Scotland and hand it to Westminster and uses Brexit which Scotland overwhelmingly rejected to justify it.

While me and my SNP MP colleagues have been exposing this damaging and dangerous Bill, when Scotland's democracy has been on the line we have seen Labour again dodge responsibility by abstaining on key amendments to protect Scotland's Parliament and Scottish Tories putting party before country.

No Westminster party can ever again credibly claim that Scotland is an “equal partner” in a “family of nations”.

With the prospect of the foundations of devolution now being trashed, independence is now clearly the only way to uphold Scottish democracy.

That is why I am not surprised that poll after poll is showing that independence is backed by the majority of the Scottish people, and we must do all we can to make it happen.

9/10 GLASGOW SOUTH WEST RESIDENTS SUPPORTS FIREWORKS BAN



Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to respond to my survey on the private use of fireworks.

A huge number of you took the time to let me know your views and it will go a long way in informing my representations on your behalf to the Scottish Government, including writing to the Minister for Community Safety Ash Denham MSP outlining the results.

The results of the survey show that the overwhelming majority of Glasgow South West constituents support greater restrictions on the private use of fireworks, with 9/10 of those surveyed saying they would like to see fireworks only permitted at regulated displays.

In the survey of nearly 1200 people it found:

- 92% felt the private use of fireworks was nuisance
- Over 95% of people felt that the private use of fireworks was detrimental to the welfare of pets, livestock and wildlife.
- 88% felt the private use of fireworks was dangerous.
- 95% wanted private use of fireworks to be more restricted
- And, 90% wanted fireworks to be restricted to only private displays.

The survey results match the tone of much of the correspondence I have received recently on the issue and follow a similar trend as the finding of a recent Scottish Government consultation last year on firework use where 87% supported a ban.

My results also clearly show that people want action to protect our nation's pets and livestock, with over 95% of you surveyed worrying about the distress their use has on pets.

Last November, following a public consultation, the Scottish Government committed to establishing a firework review group.

The purpose of the group was to look at legislative change and make recommendations on tightening legislation on the harmful use of fireworks.

The group, which was chaired by former Chief Officer of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Alasdair Hay, and had representation from stakeholders and animal welfare organisations, earlier this year submitted its final report.

The group has recommended a fundamental shift in how fireworks are accessed and used in Scotland.

It recommended a set of measures which included the introduction of mandatory conditions when fireworks are purchased; restricting the times of the day fireworks can be sold and quantity that can be purchased; restricting days and times that fireworks can be set off; introducing no fireworks zones and introducing a proxy purchasing offence so that adults can no longer buy fireworks.

Like the Scottish Government, I welcome the findings and recommendations of the report and it would be a positive step in the right direction in mitigating some of the harms of private firework use and will give communities a stronger voice in influencing whether fireworks can be used in their local area.

I will continue to give voice to the views of my constituents on this issue as they have strongly voiced their opinion, through this survey, and they want Scotland to have a different, less harmful, relationship with fireworks.

“Game Changer” Scottish Child Payment Opens Early for Applications

The new Scottish Child Payment – which has been described as a “game-changer” in the fight to tackle child poverty – has opened early for applications

The Scottish Government has prioritised the early introduction of the new benefit for eligible families on low incomes with a child under 6 and despite the impact and disruption of Covid-19, is able to start payments from February 2021.

The new benefit will provide an extra £10 per week for each child, and be annually uprated in line with inflation. Introducing the benefit for all under-16s is planned for by the end of 2022.

The Payment is the biggest benefit that the Scottish Government has introduced to date, and the most ambitious anti-poverty measure currently being undertaken anywhere in the UK.



Shona Robison, Chair of the SNP's Social Justice Commission, said:

“The Scottish Child Payment is an ambitious new benefit which will directly tackle child poverty across the country.

“This support is needed more than ever, and it's early introduction for under-6s – almost two years ahead of the original commitment for a new payment – will be a lifeline for many such families across Scotland.

“While the SNP Government does everything it can to support children in poverty – including increasing support for families and providing free school meals through all holidays – the Tories at Westminster are still helplessly trying to defend their indefensible decision to deprive children of free school meals over the holidays.

“Tory cuts are driving too many families into poverty. With the full powers of independence, we can tackle child poverty – not leave children and families depending on the whim of this callous Tory government.”

You may be able to get Scottish Child Payment if

Applications are now open for those eligible. You can check eligibility and apply online at: <https://www.mygov.scot/scottish-child-payment/how-to-apply/>

YOUR VOICE ON THE DWP SELECT COMMITTEE



It's important to my constituents that they have services there to protect them through each stage of their lives.

This starts with child maintenance to look after our youngest, the welfare system to protect people through their working lives, and finally pensions to support our older people. Most of the powers over these issues are still held by Westminster and are administered by its Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Westminster keeps an eye on the DWP through its Work and Pensions Select Committee, which has 6 Conservative MPs, 4 Labour, and me as the sole SNP member.

Most Wednesday mornings the Committee meets for about 2 hours and puts questions to panels of well-informed witnesses from a wide range of backgrounds. I joined the Select Committee in 2017, and some of the subjects discussed since summer 2020 include:

- Response to coronavirus: child poverty and development
- Support for new benefit claimants during the pandemic
- Implementing a universal basic income (UBI)
- Preparations for changes in the world of work
- Pension scams
- DWP Annual Report and Accounts
- National Audit Office - Value for Money
- Social Metrics Commission.

After discussing and considering the responses on subjects like these, the Select Committee produces a Report which is presented to the Government, often making policy recommendations. The Government, in turn, is expected to make a formal response to the Report.

If you ever want to watch the DWP Select Committee in action then you can see a video of it at: <https://www.parliamentlive.tv/Commons>

INDEPENDENCE THE ONLY WAY TO PROTECT SCOTLAND FROM £40BN AUSTERITY CUTS

The Chancellor's spending plans make it clear that the only way to protect Scotland's families and escape austerity is with independence – after experts warned they could lead to £40bn of further austerity cuts.

Speaking in an online briefing session, the Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), Paul Johnson, said "if the Chancellor did want to aim for current budget balance he'd eventually need a 2% of national income fiscal tightening – about £40bn in today's terms."

He added that the public sector pay freeze seemed "driven by politics, not by economics or the need to spend money either equitably or efficiently" and that this was "no way either to spend public money or to treat public sector workers."

The IFS also renewed calls for the UK Government to make the Universal Credit increase permanent and if it is not going to do so then "it should say so explicitly and give people time to prepare" and avoid a "nasty shock."

This is following repeated calls by myself and colleagues for the Tory Government to make the £20 boost to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits permanent – and extend that same support to legacy benefits – to prevent 4.5 million families losing out on £1000 per year and 700,000 people being plunged into poverty.



The COVID pandemic has been a devastating blow to the economy, affecting businesses and people's jobs and livelihoods. Yet we are stuck with a UK Government not able to rise to the scale of the crisis, and yesterday's spending review will again needlessly hurt family incomes, inevitably delaying economic recovery.

I have been clear throughout this unprecedented health pandemic that key measures to prevent unemployment and ensure a strong economic recovery were needed. Yet instead we have a Government determined to slow recovery with cuts to public sector pay, an unwillingness to make the £20 uplift to Universal Credit permanent or extending it to legacy benefits, and fiscal stimulus which falls well short of the £98 billion required.

The UK Government must not repeat the mistakes of the past, leading to soaring unemployment, and pushing millions into further hardship and poverty. It must instead commit to investment and strengthen public services, including increase welfare protections.

Sadly, though the Tories have repeatedly proven that this is not their priority, so the only way to protect the people of Scotland and escape another decade of austerity cuts is with the full fiscal powers of independence.



Telephone Surgery

Weekly Telephone Surgery each Friday between 2pm – 4pm

To arrange an appointment call 0141 883 0875 or email chris.stephens.mp@parliament.uk



THANK YOU TO THE GREAT PEOPLE OF GLASGOW SOUTH WEST

As I consider the events of the year, I feel a great deal of sadness for all those loved ones who have been lost due to COVID, and my heartfelt condolences go out to each and every family suffering a tragic loss of life at this time.

I have been particularly saddened to see the families of some of my regular constituency correspondents get in touch with the office to say that they had lost loved ones. My prayers are with them all.

Over recent months we have also heartbreakingly lost several young people who have tragically taken their own lives in Glasgow South West. This hit our community particularly hard and we are all grieving the devastating loss of these young people who had their whole lives in front of them.

I want to pay thanks to TURF Youth Project, which has organised social-distanced meetings to communicate with young people and their families. We need to make sure that young people have opportunities, not just job opportunities but creative opportunities. We must make sure that they have the necessary support, the club infrastructure and all those things so that they have a creative outlet to express themselves.

However, 2020 won't just be remembered for the sadness it has caused for so many, we will also all remember the extraordinary way people in our communities across Scotland stepped up in the time of need.

We have the heroic efforts of frontline NHS, social care and other key workers who risked their own health to save the lives of others. I have nothing but admiration for their bravery, and my thanks goes to each and every one of them.

In Glasgow South West I have also witnessed a heroic voluntary effort to support people in hardship and my appreciation and thanks goes out to all of you on behalf of everyone in our great constituency.

Earlier this year, I was pleased to get out and meet and congratulate the constituency organisations for all they do for our communities.

This is something I have done every year since my election in 2015, however it was a particular privilege this year to be able to go and pay tribute in person and thank organisations who have stepped up so brilliantly to assist vulnerable people in this unprecedented year.

I pay tribute to organisations like G53 Together who brought together a team of organisations and people to provide a local foodbank, to deliver emergency food provisions, provide a shopping service and prescription pick up service, offer activities for children and set-up a community helpline.

I also want to pay tribute to the numerous food provision projects across Glasgow South West run by organisations like Govan Youth Information Project (GYIP), Ridgeway Dairy alongside Drumoyne Community Council, Pollok United and Govan Help.

Through my working links with Feeding Britain, I am pleased I have been able to help support Glasgow South West food projects since March with more than £90,000 of funding.

This is just some of the work of our fantastic community organisations over the last few months, but they are just the tip of the iceberg of the support which has been offered for people in our constituency.

The community response in Glasgow South West has been truly remarkable and we are very lucky to have so many people who were willing to step up in a time of need.

It is a real testament to the character of the Glasgow people and resilience to support each other in crisis. It has been truly humbling, and my warmest thanks goes to you all from the bottom of my heart.



VISIT TO RIDGEWAY DAIRY

VISIT TO G53 TOGETHER

VISIT TO GOVAN HELP FOODBANK



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