

Investigation was not tough enough

I HAVE called for new powers to help consumers to deal with energy companies.

In July, I led an adjournment debate on consumers' rights and the energy industry after a number of constituents contacted me about the prices they had been charged and the way the industry operates.

This also follows an announcement by Ofgem that Npower should repay an average of £6 each to 200,000 of its gas customers.

The regulator said customers had paid more than they should have when their tariffs were changed.

I believe the investigation and its recommendations were not tough enough and will continue to argue for a far more robust defence of consumer interests.

Vitamin decision

IN June, I called on the Government to ensure the food supplement industry was not damaged by European legislation.

In 2005, the European Union decided to tighten the rules on the sale of vitamins and minerals which included putting restrictions on the upper limits of vitamin doses. The EU is now in the process of setting these levels.

My constituency includes Brunel Healthcare, in Swadlincote, that makes food supplements. I want to ensure that maximum limits are set at a level which permits the use of supplements sold safely for many years in the UK.

Arts centre work

WE are pushing ahead with plans to build an arts centre.

The district has only a few small venues despite having a wealth of talent. My working group has been forging a partnership which could provide performing spaces in the Building Schools for the Future programme to rebuild Swadlincote's secondary schools. We are confident that our ideas will be listened to.

Help agreed to ease pressure on care farms

IN November, I led a parliamentary debate calling for care farming to be better supported.

Care farming means that areas such as farms, woodlands and market gardens are used to provide care and training for people with learning or social difficulties.

I pointed out that research showed that care farming was a viable solution to address pressures on public services as well as ensuring the economic viability of some farms.

But there are only around 80 farms in the UK at the moment, compared to much larger numbers in other European countries such as the Netherlands where there are around 600.

Care farms have no sustained source of funding and have to deal with bureaucracy from multiple public agencies.

One of those farms is Happy Hens – an egg-producing business – which is run by Roger Hosking and his wife, Beryl, in Etwell.

During the debate, Government minister Jane Kennedy pledged to meet with members of the National Care Farming



Roger Hosking, who runs Happy Hens in Etwell.



Initiative which was started in 2006 to promote care farming across the UK. At the meeting, she agreed to help.

The NCFI is continuing to meet with Government officials and I remain in touch with them to stay updated on progress.

Campaign to extend free fruit

FOR the past year, I have been looking at the issue of free fruit in schools.

Currently, a Government scheme provides fruit (and vegetables) only to infant children aged four to seven.

My team carried out research in this constituency which showed that the vast majority of primary schools did not extend the scheme through their own resources, though a handful were able to provide leftovers to older children. There was also widespread support for my campaign.

At the end of last year, the European Parliament voted in favour of a directive to

spend £71m annually to provide fruit and vegetables to primary school children up to the age of 11 across Europe.

The World Health Organisation recommends a daily intake of 400g of fruit and vegetables per person. Most of the EU's 27 member states currently fail to meet that target.

But the scheme has to be approved by member states, including the UK, which have to match-fund the costs.

So in February, I joined forces with Glenis Willmott, East Midlands MEP, who is also a health spokesperson

in Europe, to apply pressure on the Government to adopt the scheme.

We launched the campaign at Weston-on-Trent C of E Primary School where staff make sure that all children get the fruit by using leftovers and their own resources.

We were also supported by Andrew Fogarty, senior lecturer at the University of Nottingham, who carried out research in 2007 which showed that children increased their fruit intake when they were getting free fruit from schools but this stopped once the scheme ended at seven years.



Action over study on vital treatment

THE Government has agreed to fast-forward the study of a treatment that often extends the life of motor neurone disease patients – following my parliamentary debate.

MND is an incurable disease of the nervous system and is fatal, typically, within 14 months of diagnosis.

Non-invasive ventilation helps patients with weak respiratory muscles to maintain oxygen levels.

The MND Association asked the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence to look at the treatment in 2006 but a decision would not have been made until 2011.

Since the debate in March, the assessment has been brought forward.

Card plans costly

THIS year, I have twice called on the Government to abandon its plans for ID cards.

Since November, ID cards have been compulsory for foreign nationals living in the UK. The National Identity Register, containing fingerprints, names, dates of birth and addresses, will be the basis for cards to be offered to the rest of the population from 2011. I believe this will be costly, unnecessary and ineffective.

Pledge on reading

STENSON Fields Primary Community School runs the Every Child a Reader scheme using a technique called Reading Recovery to help children in years one and two who are behind with skills.

The school was given its award in January at an event organised by the Every Child a Chance Trust which ran the scheme nationally before the Government took over in September.

In South Derbyshire, three schools run Reading Recovery, but I am pushing for more to be involved.

The Government has pledged to extend the scheme to 30,000 children by 2011.

Voicing fears over cashing-in on miners' claims

FOR many years, I have been monitoring schemes to compensate former miners and their families as chairman of the East Midlands Coal Health Committee.

My concerns about the schemes for vibration white finger and lung disease led to a National Audit Office investigation which found

that too much money had been unnecessarily spent on solicitors and advisers.

This year, I have voiced my worries that agencies would now try to cash in on miners' knee.

In June, the Government announced that ex-miners with osteoarthritis of the knee could claim Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit.

It is expected that 10,000 miners who have worked in the industry longer than 10 years will benefit.

The claim process is free. The benefit is dealt with at six Jobcentre Plus centres in the UK, including one in the East Midlands.

The East Midlands centre can be contacted by calling 0845 608 8779.

Helping with debt worries

THE past year has been marked by recession bringing both individual financial problems and business failures.

As a member of the Treasury Select Committee, I have been able to gain a good understanding of the many factors behind the collapse of some banks and the subsequent unemployment and debt.

I have always felt that South Derbyshire is better placed than many places to cope, with its reliance on strong companies like Toyota and Rolls-Royce.

But people have suffered and my office – and other agencies – have seen a marked increase in debt enquiries.

Earlier this year, I convened a credit-crunch round-table – made up of local

organisations that can help people.

One of our first initiatives was to send a leaflet to all households in the district making them aware of the help that is available.

I have also persevered with my campaign to decrease the number of fee-charging cash machines in South Derbyshire.

There are currently 22 locations where you have to pay to withdraw your own money compared to a handful of free-access ones – most of which are located in larger areas like Swadlincote.

I am working with HSBC to persuade more shopkeepers to introduce free access or switch their existing machine.