



As readers may know I lead the UK Parliamentary Delegation to the Council of Europe on behalf of the Government. Whilst this does take me away some of the time it also enables me to steer a positive contribution for the UK as well as all other Member countries. For example at the January meeting of the international delegation I put forward a paper for the introduction of a new International Convention or Treaty on the protection of the environment in times of armed conflict. Whilst this could seem remote what would mean is that we would have something with which to prosecute a crime such as deliberately exposing a community to chemical weapons. I have been working too with the UN on this. Something long needed.

Whilst on the subject of Europe there has been talk of the UK leaving the European Court of Human Rights. I am a firm believer that we should stay a member of the Court and of the Convention on Human Rights. The Court is not a foreign court but is an international body in which we share responsibility with the other countries who are members. I believe that leaving the Court would be disastrous for the UK. I am sure we will hear more on this in the coming months.

Much more locally I have been pursuing issues relating to our GPs. I fully appreciate that some constituents have been frustrated at issues around access and face to face appointments. At the same time many of our GPs are feeling under huge pressure. Towards the end of last year I met with some of our GPs to listen to their concerns and this month I called together a meeting with other Oxfordshire MPs and the Chief Executive of the local Integrated Care Board (ICB) which oversees primary care provision. Among the issues raised was that of some GP practices closing their books to new patients. My view is that this is an unfair move for other Practices and for residents who cannot register locally. Further it does not solve the problem. The senior ICB team agreed to meet with local GP teams and pursue the this and other issues with them. I will be following up on this in due course.

Also working with other Oxfordshire MPs, I have been looking into the issue raised with me by a number of parents of the decision by the County Council to withdraw its 'spare seat scheme' for school transport on some services. This is essentially a scheme where any unallocated seats on school buses could be offered to parents of children not eligible for free school transport for a fee. Removal of this scheme inevitably leads to a negative impact for working parents, but it also puts many more cars on the road. The latter flies in the face of the County Councils own environmental ambitions where they have promised to reduce car journeys by 1-4. There are also safety implications for those children who would have to walk along busy roads not served by footpaths to get to school. The County Council said that as it did not have a statutory duty to deliver such a scheme it did not need to involve parents in the decision making. We have urged them to reconsider this decision as a matter of urgency as it is causing huge stress to many families.

I have long supported the part that apprenticeships play in the transition from full time education to work as a robust alternative to a university or college course for some people. I am therefore delighted to see that for young people seeking apprenticeships as an alternative to university there is good news. Plans have been launched to allow young people to use the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, more commonly referred to as UCAS, to search and apply for apprenticeships alongside degrees. This will give them a better understanding of all the options available to them so they can get the best possible start in life. This will take time to get up and running and will be available from next year.

There are, of course, many big issues which affect us all which are will rehearsed in the national media and which the government is already working to address. If there is a particular issue that concerns you, please do share your thoughts. If you would like to know more about my work on behalf of the Government, and in the Constituency, please do look at my website. The address is [www.johnhowell.org.uk](http://www.johnhowell.org.uk). My contact details are also on the website.