

Marie Goldman

MP for Chelmsford



I'd like to see old-fashioned stigma about apprenticeships disappear

LAST week was recess - half-term for Parliament - so while giving myself a little bit of time off parliamentary work to get some 'normal life' stuff done (my orchids are now looking a lot happier for being repotted), I was also able to spend some time visiting various organisations that serve Chelmsford.

Last Friday in particular was a busy day out and about, which I'd like to tell you about.

First off, I visited Essex & Suffolk Water at Hanningfield reservoir. Now, I'll start by saying that some water companies are, quite rightly, in my opinion, currently being given a tough time by the public and politicians. And no wonder. With our rivers, waterways and seas being polluted from vast quantities of sewage discharges, at the same time as ever-rising water bills, and water company bosses and shareholders still getting huge bonuses and dividends, I share the public's anger. But we must always be careful to make sure we point the finger of blame in the right direction, and here in Chelmsford, the picture is complicated by the fact that we have one water company (Essex & Suffolk Water) that supplies our water, and another one (Anglian Water) that takes it away.

Sewage discharges in our area are the responsibility of Anglian Water, not Essex & Suffolk Water.

So, while I raised constituents' concerns about rising water bills and made enquiries about the relationships between the two companies, that wasn't the main purpose of my visit. Instead, I was there to find out more about the apprenticeships it runs, and to meet some of its apprentices.

I met three people at various stages of apprenticeship during my visit; one who had been an apprentice several years ago and had not only successfully completed his course, but also had stayed with the company, now working as an engineering manager. One apprentice had just recently started out, and another was part-way through his apprenticeship. All couldn't sing the praises of apprenticeships enough, and were keen to point out the vari-



Marie Goldman MP talking with apprentices at Essex and Suffolk Water



Neil Webster showing Marie Goldman MP the spider frame at Mini Wonders



'Outstanding' work at Manor Lodge Care Home



Marie Goldman MP in the driving seat at First Bus
PHOTOS: MARIE GOLDMAN MP

ety of the work plus the importance of being able to study at the same time as working and learning their trade on the job alongside fully-qualified professionals.

One young apprentice told me his friends were sometimes surprised when he told them he was training to be an electrician for a water company - but of course, there's a whole load of engineering that goes with keeping water supplies running around the system, including keeping power supplies for pumps and other infrastructure fully connected and operational.

I've written before about what an attractive and brilliant alternative I think apprenticeships can be to the traditional route of GCSEs, A-levels and then a degree at university.

Many apprenticeship schemes can also lead to a degree, but with real-world work experience and without the associated debt. Unfortunately, I think there is still some old-fashioned stigma attached to apprenticeships that I'd like to see disappear. It would be great to see more schools and teachers promoting apprenticeships as an alternative route. If you're a secondary school teacher giving careers advice and would like to find out more, do get in contact. I'm sure I can link you up with some great local companies, including Essex & Suffolk Water, to find out more about what they do.

It really was good to hear from the apprentices. I could tell how much they valued the work they had been doing and will be great ambassadors for the company.

My second visit of the day was to a wonderful company called Mini Wonders. Run by director and founder Neil Webster, Mini Wonders specialises in children's physiotherapy and its philosophy of early inter-

vention and using innovations in paediatric physiotherapy to give children the physical support they need to develop, grow and achieve their full potential was just brilliant to see.

But it wasn't all good news. Many of the case studies we talked about were uplifting - stories of children who would otherwise have been in a wheelchair years earlier with muscles wasting away, instead being supported to combat their disability and remain healthier because of it.

However, for every child that was being supported, we talked about the many, many more who aren't getting that early intervention, sometimes ending up with operation after sometimes unnecessary operation because that's the system we've got. I agreed with Neil that I'd love to see a different approach being at least trialled - not only to see if it will improve lives and outcomes, but also if it might save the NHS money in the long-term. I'm keen to bring together different

organisations to look at the feasibility of that. I don't know how possible that may be, but I think we should at least be discussing it.

My next stop was at the First Bus depot off Waterhouse Lane by the Clock Tower retail park. I have to say that I get a LOT of complaints about First Bus into my inbox, and I can completely understand why. Many constituents have been in touch to tell me their ongoing frustrations with buses not turning up on time, if at all. They tell me about the digital displays at the bus station not providing accurate information, with buses sometimes just disappearing from the display altogether. They've told me about the unreliability of First Bus's app, and many more issues besides. The most common theme running through everything was poor communication, and I raised all of these issues in my meeting with First Bus representatives, which included the managing director and the regional director.

It was, I have to say, a very constructive and helpful conversation and I'm keen to keep a good dialogue going as it works on making its services better in Chelmsford. One good bit of news is that it is working towards electrifying Chelmsford's fleet in the next few years, so while it's not imminent, it's definitely on the horizon.

As always, if you have a specific issue, you can contact First Bus directly via its website (<https://www.firstbus.co.uk/help-support/help-and-support>), but if you don't feel you're getting anywhere (perhaps literally and figuratively), please do let my team know.

First Bus wanted to underline how important it is to have specific details of your journey if you encounter an issue, including (if possible and applicable) the five-digit code from the side of the bus and the date and time, which will allow it to investigate more easily.

And finally, I popped into Manor Lodge Care Home, in Manor Road, Old Moulsham, to join in its celebrations for retaining its 'Outstanding' rating from the Care Quality Commission.

We live in a world where we are often so quick to criticise and complain, so it's genuinely lovely to be able to celebrate success. A huge, well-deserved congratulations to all the team at Manor Lodge Care Home.

Thanks for reading.

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