

[*Mr. Alan Campbell*]

in their areas as a result of recovering assets. I assure my hon. Friend that we take his points seriously and I will certainly reflect on his remarks.

On the funding formula, I assure my hon. Friend that I did not take what he said as special pleading. I took it as him standing up for his constituents, for which I applaud him, even though I cannot necessarily agree with what he asked us to do. The formula has been in development for many years and is under constant review. It will go out for consultation in the summer of 2010, and I hope that he and his police authority will make the points that he made on behalf of his area and that changes can be made, if necessary.

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of damping. I understand that some police force areas, such as his, are adversely affected by damping; I assure him that mine—Northumbria—benefits from it. It is not just about applying rules but about whether the rules are right in the first place. To state the blindingly obvious, the pot remains the same size. If we change the funding formula and someone wins, someone else will lose. Damping ensures that nobody loses to the extent that it completely disrupts their activity.

The announcement on capital allocations was delayed until January, but I assure my hon. Friend that it was made today. Capital allocations for 2010-11 will be unchanged from those announced provisionally at the start of the comprehensive spending review period. That is good news for his area, which will receive £8.6 million and will not require decisions about capital and revenue funding to be made. The money will be there for capital funding and for front-line officers.

The pre-Budget report brought positive news for the future of police funding beyond 2010, as my hon. Friend acknowledged. There will be sufficient funding in 2012-13 to enable police authorities to maintain current numbers of warranted police officers and police community support officers. It is not our view that areas will need to increase their precept greatly. In fact, we believe that the 3 per cent. figure is accurate and necessary, not just because it allows the police to continue to be funded properly in their areas, but because it protects council tax payers in general. There is a balance to be struck, but I am sure that he will make a contribution by lobbying his community and local government to argue, when the time is necessary, the issues around council tax.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on what he has done throughout his time in this House. He has stood up for his constituents, especially by speaking about their safety and security. I hope that I have provided him with assurances on most of the points that he raised, and I will ask my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime and Counter-Terrorism to write to him about any outstanding questions.

## Multiple Births

4.39 pm

**Bob Russell** (Colchester) (LD): Twins are nature's original "buy one, get one free". Occasionally, the special offer on a single transaction can be even greater: three or, more rarely, four for the price of one. Are twins double joy or double trouble? My personal experience is that the answer to both is yes, although "trouble" is better defined as cost and a double work load, particularly during infancy.

This debate is primarily about the educational consequences for families with twins or other multiple births. I am grateful to the Twins and Multiple Births Association—Tamba—which has assisted me with the statistical background to what can be a serious issue or series of issues for such families.

Parents of twins and other multiple birth children can do without the uncaring attitude that some schools and local authorities can take, although fortunately that was not the experience that my wife and I had in Colchester. Research by Tamba throughout the country discovered that about 200 sets of twins every year were allocated places at different schools against the wishes of their parents. There are frequent examples of schools ignoring parental choice by placing twins in separate classes when their parents wish them to be in the same class, or putting them in the same class when their parents want them to be in separate ones. I hope that this debate will lead to the Government introducing guidelines so that twins and other multiple birth children will always be allocated places in the same school, unless the parents choose otherwise. I hope also that parental choice will prevail in the allocation of places in classes.

The most recent high-profile twins to attract media attention were Jedward, the entertainment hopefuls on television's "The X Factor". Less well publicised was the birth on new year's eve of the twin grandsons of the Duchess of Cornwall in London. Somehow, I do not think the parents of Louis and Gus will have the same experiences as many other parents of twins. The most significant multiple birth of recent years, in the UK at least, occurred as recently as Sunday 27 December, when Mrs. Lisa Kelly gave birth in Newcastle to quadruplet daughters—Heidi, Annabelle, Hannah and Jessica. Newspaper reports state that they are the first set of quads made up of two sets of identical twins born in this country. I congratulate the father, Mr. Sean Kelly, and mother on the safe arrival of their four baby daughters. I also congratulate the family of the Duchess of Cornwall and all other families blessed with multiple births over Christmas and the new year.

There is much joy at the birth of any child, or there should be. I have many fond memories of becoming a father for the first time—twice over. My wife went into hospital to have a baby and gave birth to two wonderful boys. Only when the first was born was it realised there was a second. That was nearly 42 years ago; the scanners used today would have shown that my wife was carrying twins.

About 10,000 sets of twins and 130 sets of triplets are born each year. Problems frequently experienced by multiple birth children include prematurity, speech and language delays, and physical, emotional and social

immaturity. A recent survey of 939 parents of multiples, conducted by Dr. Erika Fraser for Tamba, looked at the educational needs and experiences of multiple birth children at pre-school, primary school and secondary school level, and at the additional challenges faced by the families of multiples when applying for schools.

Tamba works throughout the UK and has nearly 8,000 family members and 150 club members. The impetus for the survey was the growing number of parents who were asking for Tamba's help because their twins who were about to begin primary school were being offered places at separate schools. Understandably, parents were concerned that sending their children to different schools was practically difficult and could cause serious emotional and developmental problems.

The findings of the survey suggest that around 200 sets of twins are offered places at different schools each year. Tamba's meetings with local education authorities across England support that finding. I welcome the recommendations of the chief schools adjudicator on amending the admissions code to ensure that children from multiple births are allocated places together at primary school and that the list of "excepted pupils" in the class size regulations be extended to include them. I understand that the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families has accepted that recommendation and the further recommendation that all admission authorities should be required to consult on and publish arrangements for the admission of twins and children from multiple births. It would help parents and authorities if the Minister clarified the timetable for amending the code.

Tamba's survey uncovered another troubling issue: primary school children being separated into different classrooms against their parents' wishes. Each year, almost 2,000 multiple birth children who start at a primary school with two or more reception classes are split up without their parents having any input in the decision. A further 500 children are placed in the same classroom against their parents' wishes.

Why is that issue important? In a number of cases, early enforced separation causes mental health problems for children. New research by King's college London's twins early development study, which is a national study of 2,232 twin children, found that twins aged five who were separated at the start of primary school had on average more emotional problems than non-separated twins, such as symptoms of withdrawal, depression, shyness and anxiety. The effects of early separation were still detectable at ages seven, 10 and 12—seven years later. The differences were consistent whether the twins' emotional problems were rated by the parent, teacher or child. Not all twins were affected in the same way, however, and some might benefit from early separation. It is therefore important that schools treat multiples on a case-by-case basis and consult with parents about what would be best.

The problem of splitting twins was highlighted recently in *The Guardian*. It reported the case of Darras Hall first school near Newcastle, which has a policy on the matter. Angela Parkinson has identical six-year-old boys, as well as two other sets of twins, who were automatically split up when they started at the school. She said:

"I went to see the reception class teacher and she said in their experience twins developed better (when split), but she didn't seem to have much evidence to back it up, and I have to say I wasn't convinced. All the same we had no choice."

She added:

"We are happy with the school in almost every other way, but I think my twins would have been better kept together and I think schools should listen to parents' views on that."

Tamba confirms that that case is typical and the charity has supported dozens of families who wished to keep their children together or separate them across different classes.

One of the most concerning cases, which has been ongoing for many months, is of twin boys who were upset because they were split up against their will. Those arrangements, which were imposed on the family, are making school an unpleasant experience. The parents, supported by expert opinion, pleaded with the head teacher on a number of occasions to alter the arrangements, but their pleas were met with a stubborn refusal to act. The situation was avoidable, but instead the family has been forced into the sad situation of considering legal action against the school to ensure that their children's best interests are finally met.

In the absence of national guidance, Tamba expects many more schools to face similar legal challenges. I note from the answer to my recent parliamentary question that the Government believe:

"It is up to individual schools to determine which classes children from multiple births should be placed in."—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2009; Vol. 501, c. 836W.]

I would welcome confirmation from the Minister that he agrees with me that such decisions are best made in consultation with parents. I would also welcome insight into what further action might be considered to avoid parents being forced to take legal action against schools, should a dispute arise.

Another significant issue is the uncertainty faced by parents of premature children who wish to delay school entry by a year because the birth date would put the child in a school year 12 months ahead of when they should have started. Tamba estimates that about half of all multiple births are premature. In about 20 per cent. of those cases, babies who should have arrived after September arrive earlier—some as early as June. About 2,000 multiples who are born prematurely effectively end up starting school in the wrong school year. If the parents of those children were allowed to correct their age in line with their gestation, they would not have to enter school until they were almost five. Currently, most go into reception when, had they arrived at nine months' gestation, they would have been three years old. By starting school a year too soon, such children spend their school life trying to keep up with children of up to a year older. That problem comes in addition to the developmental delay that is common in premature babies, and very common in those born before 32 weeks. Many multiples also have speech and language delays as a result of having less one-to-one time with their parents.

The survey found all sorts of problems resulting from premature children starting school too early, such as speech problems, tiredness, learning and behaviour difficulties, toilet accidents, difficulties getting themselves changed for PE, being academically behind their peers, and being emotionally and socially immature. Parents of those born in the wrong school year were almost twice as likely to be worried about their children being educationally behind their peers and emotionally immature, and 64 per cent. of parents thought that they were too young when they started school. Those concerns are

[Bob Russell]

shared by Bliss, the premature baby charity. I welcome the recent consultation on improving the flexibility in deferring entry to school. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government intend to do the same for those who want to delay?

The survey found that young multiples have restricted access to play and educational opportunities. In particular, parents find it difficult to take their young multiples swimming, with 70 per cent. missing out. Other activities that many parents found unmanageable with only one set of eyes and hands included going to gym classes, playgrounds, soft play areas, baby massage classes and toddler groups that are spread across a number of rooms. Financial costs can also be prohibitive.

According to Professor Pat Preedy, a leading researcher into prematurity and multiples, it is vital for premature children—especially multiples—to move a lot as it aids their physical development. Play opportunities can improve learning and social interaction, and help to reduce the isolation of mothers and prevent postnatal depression, which research shows is twice as likely for mothers of multiples than for mothers of singletons.

The Government's response to another of my parliamentary questions suggested that the play strategy and Sport England's swimming pool design guidance should enable everyone to swim and play without difficulty. Clearly, that is not happening. I would therefore welcome further clarification of how the Government intend to address the difficulties that many larger families have in taking part in simple activities, such as learning to swim or going to the playground.

I am sure that the Minister will agree it is important that all families that want their children to attend pre-school or other early-years settings should be able to ensure that that happens. However, the survey found that a significant number of families were unable to do so because of cost or because places were not available. The answer to another of my recent parliamentary questions is clear as far as it goes:

"Local authorities have a duty to ensure there is sufficient provision in their area, but this does not necessarily ensure that the specific needs and preferences of families can always be met."—[*Official Report*, 1 December 2009; Vol. 501, c. 706W.]

I would welcome the Minister's confirmation of how the problem that some multiple birth families have in accessing places at the same setting can be addressed. It appears that the lack of accessible and affordable child care provision might have an impact on the number of mothers who work and the level of household income.

Tamba has commissioned a study to show how family finances are affected by multiple births and the results are expected in the coming months. It is being conducted by Professor Steven McKay, a leading social scientist who is based at Birmingham university, and it analyses a number of nationwide surveys that include large samples of children. The study will look at factors such as incomes, receipt of benefits, living standards and patterns of work. Some analysis has already taken place and early findings suggest that having a multiple birth is associated with a slightly increased work effort by fathers, but rather decreased rates of work among mothers, even though they tend to be older, which should cushion the impact.

Although rather more than half—56 per cent.—of all mothers are in paid work, that figure drops to 47 per cent. among those with twins or higher order births. Those mothers are also working about two hours less each week. Consequently, these families as a whole appear to have a lower household income and experience greater material deprivation. Sadly, there is also evidence that mothers with twins are more likely to be divorced or separated, although fewer are single and with no experience of marriage. Financial pressures are often regarded as a significant reason for couples to separate. Tamba has long campaigned for greater practical state support for these families, including the payment of additional benefits to recognise the additional social and financial strain caused by having a multiple birth. I would welcome the Minister's comments on that.

Remus and Romulus are arguably the most famous twins in history, but for the House of Commons, our history makers are twin sisters: the Minister for Pensions and the Ageing Society, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), and the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), who I believe are the only pair of twins to have served in the House. For the record, research by Tamba shows that there are eight right hon. and hon. Members who are fathers of twins: myself, the right hon. Members for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) and for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), the hon. Members for Blyth Valley (Mr. Campbell), for Falkirk (Mr. Joyce), for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) and for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis), and my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Mark Williams). On behalf of all eight fathers, I thank our respective wives for giving us the special extra joy of giving birth to twins. Despite unfounded boasts that that might perhaps warrant claims for super-stud status, we all recognise that it is the mother, not the father, who determined the wonderful bonus of two children.

4.53 pm

**The Minister for Schools and Learners (Mr. Vernon Coaker):** It is a pleasure to be in Westminster Hall under your chairmanship, Mr. Cummings, and to answer the debate initiated by the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell). I had forgotten that he was the father of twins and have never thought of him as a super-stud—I have never looked at him in that way before.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. It is another example of how he takes up and pursues with great determination and vigour causes in his own constituency—for example, he is doing so with a current campaign on school organisation in Colchester. He also takes up many other issues in Colchester, as well as matters that are not always in the headlines, but are none the less extremely important and of national significance and concern. We should reflect on the fact that he takes great pride in pursuing national issues, as well as issues in his own constituency.

May I also take this opportunity to congratulate Tamba on the work that it does, particularly the work of its chief executive, Keith Reed, and the people who work with him? They represent many families across the country and campaign with zeal in pursuing the various causes that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

I shall go through my formal remarks and, no doubt, if I fail to answer any of the points that he has raised, he will intervene.

This is an important topic, which the Department takes very seriously, because when we said in our children's plan that we want every child to get a good education, we meant every child. That, of course, includes families with twins and children of multiple births. I am sure that many hon. Members would agree that raising a child can prove challenging, including when finding the right local school to meet their needs. So I understand the concerns of parents who naturally wish to see their children attend school together, and I know that although twins, triplets and other multiple births bring much joy, they often bring many challenges for parents, both financially and emotionally. I assure hon. Members that we have sought to improve the process for parents, and we will continue doing so for these families.

As the hon. Gentleman has stated, some parents have had difficulty in trying to get their multiple birth children into the same school. However, let me make it clear that we will support multiple birth families throughout those important years of schooling, and we will ensure that those families are properly considered in local admissions and that their children can attend the same school wherever possible.

I want to take stock of the improvements made thus far. Over the past two years, we have strengthened the local admissions process and have put in place requirements to ensure that it is as fair as it can be, takes into account the views of parents and others and has clear lines of accountability, so that concerns can be properly addressed. The school admissions code, which came into force in February last year, places children and families at the heart of this fairer system. The schools adjudicator has much greater powers to hear about and decide upon local disputes and can strike out or rewrite unfair policies and practices.

Schools and local authorities must now set admissions arrangements following extensive consultation with the parents and communities that they serve. Local authorities in particular have a decisive role in ensuring access to state schools is fair and must report annually on their area to the chief adjudicator. Local admissions forums have a duty to review how effective local systems are at working to the benefit of children and parents. Where families do not get their first preference of school, local authorities will work towards their next preference, to offer a place at the nearest school with an available place. Children who live further than the statutory walking distance are entitled to free home-to-school transport. As a result of a stronger admissions code, we now have one of the fairest admission systems that we have ever had.

On multiple birth families and the issues that hon. Gentleman raised, I understand very well parents' passion in seeking the same school for their children. The admissions code already makes the process fairer and states:

"Families must be at the heart of the admissions system and the Government expects the admission authorities for primary schools to take the needs of parents with young children into account in deciding which oversubscription criteria will be used. The admission authorities for primary schools should ensure in their oversubscription criteria that siblings (including twins, triplets or children from other multiple births) can attend the same primary school".

I have no doubt that schools and local authorities understand that need, and many work towards fulfilling it. However, we want to make things as easy as possible for parents of every set of twins or of children from multiple births who seek a state school place.

Early last year, there was growing concern from parents whose twins were about to start their education in two separate schools, and who understandably felt left out of the process. Following that, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families asked the chief schools adjudicator to publish a report on the problem. On the 2 November 2009, he published his report, which found that, although understandably traumatic for some parents, the problem was relatively rare and only occurred when children from multiple births tied for the last available place at a local school. However, the chief adjudicator recommended that admission authorities should consult upon and publish arrangements for the admission of twins and children from multiple births and that the list of excepted pupils in the class size regulations should be extended to include those children.

**Bob Russell:** I am extremely grateful to the Minister for his helpful and positive response. Would he give as firm a guarantee as he can that, from this September, we will never again hear of a local education authority placing twins or children of multiple births in separate schools against the preferences of the parents? There will be occasions on which parents want them to go to separate schools, but when they wish their twins or triplets to go to the same school, can he give a categorical assurance that every local education authority in the country will be told that they must find places at a school for those twins or triplets?

**Mr. Coaker:** To give that the statutory force that the hon. Gentleman seeks would require a revision to the admissions code that the schools' adjudicator recommended. One of the questions the hon. Gentleman asked me, which I will answer in a moment, was when we expect that new admissions code to be in force. Before answering that, I will say that he knows—this is why it is sometimes important to read things into the record—that I hope that what he has described will be the case in September 2010, or indeed whenever young children are admitted to primary schools prior to the new regulations coming into force. To be clear, that will not have statutory force until the admissions code is amended. The fact that I have said that on the record means, I hope, that some local authorities, when coming to those decisions having read those remarks, will take the sort of decision that he and I would want.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State considered carefully and accepted in full both recommendations from the chief adjudicator. He will consult publicly on those at the next opportunity to amend the admissions code. Our expectation is that the new admissions code will be in force in early 2011, provided all goes well with the consultation. Those important changes will seek to ensure that children from multiple-birth families are routinely included in local policy making and that their parents have a say in the allocation of schools. I was particularly pleased to note that Mr. Keith Reed, the chief executive of Tamba, warmly welcomed the measures that we intend to take.

[Mr. Coaker]

I would like to address the hon. Gentleman's important point about respecting parents' wishes on what class their children should be placed in. Wherever possible, schools should take into account parents' wishes about where children should be placed, and certainly the expectation is that good practice would demand that the school consults the parents on the placement of their children. I do not know whether every parent of every twin would want their children placed in the same class, but certainly the important point the hon. Gentleman made was about consultation with parents, which is absolutely right and would be good practice in most schools.

**Bob Russell:** The point that I would like to emphasise is that some parents wish their twins to be in the same class and that others wish them to be in different classes. Whatever their choice, I hope that parental choice would prevail, because Tamba's evidence indicates that teachers and head teachers are setting themselves up as authorities on multiple births, which they are not.

**Mr. Coaker:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the rights of the parents and the expression of their wishes should be paramount. In the vast majority of cases where schools have consulted with parents who wish their children to be together, they have been placed together, and I am saying that that would be my hope and expectation. The issue for us is that framing that in legislation is difficult. However, reading into the record the fact that that is our expectation and certainly an example of good practice, which one would expect a good school to follow, means that schools will be expected to consult with parents about what they think is appropriate for their children. That would be expected to happen as

a matter of course on a range of issues, and clearly it should also happen for an issue as important as which class their sons or daughters are in.

The hon. Gentleman raised several other issues about the challenges for multiple-birth families, but we have addressed his main concerns with regard to schools. The Government have tried to reflect some of the additional financial burdens as well as the joy that such families have. We have tried to do that through the child tax credit system, and there are obviously the additional child benefits that are available for each child. One would also expect local authorities to ensure that access to their facilities was such that no family was disadvantaged. That often varies across the country, but the Government's expectation is that local authorities would properly provide for every family within their community, whatever a family's needs. For example, in some areas, discounts are available to families to ensure that they have access to facilities and services.

To conclude, I thank the hon. Gentleman again for raising this important issue. We want to ensure that every child has access to a good school in their local area, without any barriers stopping them from doing so. That is one of the Government's priorities and certainly one of mine. The measures that we intend to take via the admissions code to formalise support for families with twins, triplets or other multiple-birth children will help more families get the best for their children. As the hon. Gentleman said, every child deserves a good education. We will continue to work with local authorities, schools and families to ensure that they can access it on a fair basis and, in so doing, fully realise their potential.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.7 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*