**Helen Whately’s Parish Update – Easter 2021**

**Turning the tide on Covid**

It finally feels like spring is on the way.

The warmer weather and longer days have arrived in time for friends and family to meet up outside in groups of six, and the return of outdoor sport.

While life is still a long way from being normal, we are in a much better place than we were this time last year in terms of controlling the virus.

In the past year we have increased our testing capacity to over 1 million tests per day, we’re on track to be producing 70% of our PPE demand in the UK, and over 860,000 people have stepped forward as NHS Volunteer Responders.

It’s also been a year since the UK’s Vaccine Taskforce was created. We now have three vaccines approved for use in the UK, with over 30 million people across the country having received their first vaccination, including 800,000 people in Kent.

One of the highlights of the past few weeks has been meeting people involved in the vaccine rollout. When I visited the Faversham Medical Centre in March, staff and volunteers from Faversham Medical Practice and Newton Place Surgery were vaccinating 11 people at any one time.

This hard work and dedication can be seen by NHS staff and volunteers in vaccination sites across the country – many have been working flat out since December.

The success of the vaccine rollout has helped us take the first steps out of lockdown. As long as progress continues, we can look forward to further restrictions being lifted in April – with more shops reopening, pints in pub gardens, and people finally able to get a haircut!

Everyone can play their part in helping to control the virus by following the guidance, taking up the offer to get vaccinated, and getting tested regularly.

Together, we can turn the tide on Covid.

**Budget helps businesses back on their feet**

I know the past year has been incredibly tough for tourism and hospitality businesses, and the reopening of pub gardens in April can't come soon enough for many.

In the meantime, the extension of business rates relief is welcome news. And continuing a lower rate of VAT for the hospitality sector and a freeze on beer duty will give a boost to our pubs when they are finally able to reopen.

Restart grants to help businesses back on their feet were also announced as part of the Budget.

**Clearing up Kent’s roads**

The amount of litter on some of Kent’s roads is shocking. I’ve written to local councils and Highways England asking them to take action.

I know that a number of volunteer groups are organising litter picks – including the Swale Litter Squad - which is fantastic, but we also need help from our local authorities.

I'm pleased that Highways England have begun work to clear up the M20 between Junctions 8 and 13, which should be completed by the end of April, and Swale Borough Council have told me about plans to trial litter cameras which can identify vehicles discarding waste.

**Tell me what you think about Swale’s Local Plan**

The Local Plan shifts the housing allocation in the borough firmly towards Faversham and the surrounding villages.

While I’m pleased the Council has listened to concerns from me and others, and extended the deadline for giving feedback on the Local Plan to 30 April - this remains a consultation in name only.

People can only comment on the soundness on the proposals in planning terms, rather than giving their view on where development should be located in the borough.

With such huge changes proposed compared to the last Local Plan, I’m asking people directly what they think about the proposals in a survey on my website.

**Helping our high streets**

Help is on the way to revive our high streets after the pandemic.

Swale Borough Council is getting £199,058 from a new £56 million Welcome Back Fund to boost tourism, improve green spaces, and provide more outdoor seating areas for friends and family to meet up safely. Swale is also benefitting from the Government’s High Streets Taskforce.

In addition to extra funding, planning rules are being relaxed to allow businesses such as pubs and restaurants to serve more customers outside, and councils are being encouraged to extend opening hours for shops.

**Action on pet theft**

I know pets mean the world to people. Having a much-loved dog or cat stolen is truly heart-breaking.

I’m pleased that Ministers are looking at introducing higher sentences for pet theft, and the Government are also setting up a Taskforce to help tackle the problem.