

Merry Christmas from Helen Whately MP

So much has happened this year at such a pace, I feel I've hardly had a chance to reflect. The most important moment for me was being re-elected in June, with an increased majority. It's an honour to represent this constituency and I'm delighted that people have put their trust in me again.

Since the election Brexit has dominated the headlines, but as well as pushing for the best deal for Kent I've been getting on with my campaigns for a new hospital and a medical school, better roads and infrastructure, a good school place for every child, care for people with mental health problems and a seasonal workers scheme for farmers.

One of the big lessons from this summer is that we need to do more for young people. For people in their 30s as their careers develop, for people in their 20s as they set out in the world of work, for teenagers wondering what life will hold, and for smaller children like mine still dreaming of being ballerinas and footballers. So I was glad that the Budget included investment in technology, infrastructure and skills, including an extra £2.3 billion in research and development, £385 million in 5G and full-fibre broadband, and support for maths and science teaching. We have to give younger generations the skills needed for the jobs of tomorrow, and make sure the economy develops to provide those jobs.

As well as jobs, we desperately need more affordable homes. I hope the abolition of stamp duty for first-time buyers for properties under £300,000 will help people in this area – where prices are high – get on the ladder. And the Government has committed to making sure 300,000 new homes a year are built. But new housing must be in the right places and accompanied by appropriate investment in infrastructure. Ever since I was elected I have done everything I can to make the voice of local people heard in the planning process, and in particular I have spoken out against development at Junction 8.

The housing targets for Maidstone and Swale are already high and local roads are under enormous pressure, with congestion becoming the norm rather than the exception. Thousands more houses will mean more demand for healthcare and school places and many more cars on the road. So we need investment in infrastructure – like a potential Leeds-Langley relief road and an overhaul of Brenley Corner – and in public services.

The Government recognises this, and recently announced an extra £1.3 billion for schools. Local schools are getting a 6.4% funding boost – that's a total of £2.7 million more than they would have received under the old funding system. Every secondary school will receive at least £4,600 per pupil next year and £4,800 in 2019-20. High-needs funding for the most vulnerable children is also going up, and there's support for rural schools. I was delighted to be appointed as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Education Secretary Justine Greening, and in this role I have had the opportunity to be involved in conversations about education at a national level.

There have also been positive developments in the campaign for a new hospital in Canterbury and a medical school for Kent. After numerous public meetings, marches, lobbying sessions with ministers, a debate in Parliament, delivering a petition to Downing Street and handing a letter in person to Jeremy Hunt, the NHS is finally consulting on a proposal for a new hospital. I have always said that the NHS should consider a vision for healthcare in East Kent with an excellent specialist hospital in the centre. This option is now on the table. That wasn't the case a few months ago. There's still a long way to go before the final decision is made and whatever the outcome, patients must come first.

One reason local hospitals are struggling is that they can't recruit enough doctors. That's why I'm campaigning for a medical school, to train the doctors of the future locally. I recently joined forces with 15 other MPs from across the county, and across parties, to support Canterbury Christ Church and the University of Kent's joint bid to establish a medical school.

On roads, as well as tackling traffic we need to make sure there is no return to the chaos we saw two summers ago when the M20 was closed for weeks for Operation Stack. I am disappointed that plans for a lorry holding area have been delayed, however I have always said that the key is to make sure traffic can continue to flow in both directions on the M20 when Operation Stack is in place. Highways England are now proposing to hold lorries in the middle of the motorway using mobile barriers, while allowing traffic to continue to travel in both directions. This will be a temporary solution, and we still need a proper alternative to Operation Stack. The Government is now getting straight on with trying to get a lorry park approved through the normal planning process. As part of this it is broadening its scope and thinking of ways to address the broader problems of fly-parking and the potential impact of Brexit – as well as Operation Stack.

As well as increasing the number of lorry parking spaces in the County, we need tougher rules to make sure drivers park in the right places. I want to see a ban on lorries in lay-bys and I'm pleased that Kent County Council recently started clamping illegally parked trucks after the first offence. Drivers have to pay £250 to have the clamps removed. If this pilot scheme is successful I hope it will be rolled out across the County.

This is also a challenging time for local fruit farmers. We're lucky to grow some of the best strawberries, raspberries, apples and cherries in the world here in Kent, but farmers tell me they are struggling to recruit the workers they need. It's getting harder to attract seasonal workers from across the EU, and the number of local people looking for work is far too low to meet the labour needs of fruit farms. I've been campaigning along with other MPs with fruit farms in their constituencies for the Government to re-start a Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme, which is what we had before EU enlargement to provide farms with enough workers.

Nationally, I'm campaigning for better support for people with mental health problems. The more we speak about mental health—privately, publicly and in Parliament—the more we wear away the stigma that surrounds it. As chair of the all-party group on mental health, I often speak to service users, professionals and campaigners from organisations such as Rethink Mental Illness, Mind and the Royal College of Psychiatrists. They tell me there has never been a better time to be a mental health campaigner. We have the five year forward view for mental health, a truly comprehensive and widely supported strategy to improve mental health care; a Prime Minister who is committed to fighting the injustice of inadequate treatment; and a Government which is spending record amounts on improving mental health care. We're already seeing the results locally where East Kent University NHS Trust is receiving nearly £500,000 to make specialist psychiatric liaison services available in A&E and inpatient wards. But there's more to do, and I will keep on working to make sure mental health conditions are treated just as seriously as physical illnesses.

Do keep on contacting me with your concerns and views, whether in writing, by phone or by coming to one of my surgeries. I'm looking forward to spending Christmas eating far too much and spending time with my family. I wish everyone in Faversham and Mid Kent a very merry Christmas and a happy new year!