

Gareth Johnson MP for Dartford

**Reporting back from Dartford
and Westminster - now
reaching over 5,000 people in
the local area**



24th October 2020



Kent Police

Assaults on Kent emergency workers

I was shocked to learn that assaults on emergency workers in Kent have risen by 43% between March and October.

In a recent meeting I organised with Kent MPs, Kent Police Chief Alan Pughsley, reported that there have been 570 more assaults on emergency workers during this period, bringing the total to 1910.

Spitting and coughing at workers has been a particular issue during the Covid-19 pandemic, with 376 incidents in the same period, of which 284 were against police officers. To date, 147 people have been charged in relation to these incidents.

This is a shocking rise in cases and anyone who does this should go to prison. I am pleased the courts are playing their part in dealing with these people but we need to be absolutely clear that any assault on an emergency worker will lead to imprisonment. People must understand the vile practice of spitting at PCSOs and police officers during this pandemic, means you won't get bail, you won't get a community penalty, you will be going to prison. These people are there to protect us and the judicial system needs to protect them.

Kent's Police and Crime Commissioner, Matthew Scott, is increasing Tasers, supporting the use of spit and blood guards, increasing new body worn video cameras and lobbying for longer sentences.

Earlier this year, I coordinated a letter from Kent MPs to Kent's judiciary to convey our view that emergency workers deserve protection from those that deliberately cough or spit at them.



Planning and house building debate

I recently took part in a debate on Planning and House Building in the House of Commons.

I, along with many of my colleagues, raised concerns about the new standard method proposed for assessing housing need in local areas, together with a potential lack of infrastructure for such housing projects. The new standard method is designed to make sure the national aim of 300,000 new homes in England is met. The Government committed to reviewing the standard method at this year's Budget as the current method falls short of this target by 50,000.

The Government has therefore been consulting on two sets of proposals to address what needs to happen with planning in both the short term and the longer term. The first set of proposals, on changes to the current planning system and local housing need calculations, has now closed.

The second consultation, on the White Paper "Planning for the Future", sets out the Government's long-term ambition and closes on 29 October.

I would encourage you to share your views to the ongoing consultation on Planning for the Future by 29 October, which you can find online here: <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/MHCLG-Planning-for-the-Future/>

The Minister stated during his response that over the past two months his Department has actively engaged with the sector and is listening to feedback. He also said the White Paper proposes a nationally set infrastructure levy which will not only simplify the system but ensure fairer contributions from developers and increase the overall revenue raised for infrastructure such as schools, roads, clinics and playgrounds.

To see my contribution to the debate, please click on the video above.



Optical Express

This month's business is Optical Express and I was delighted to officially open its new clinic earlier this month, based at Riverbridge House, Dartford Crossways.

This new facility brings the latest diagnostic and treatment technologies in eye care to the area, including laser eye, Intraocular Lens (IOL) and cataract surgery.

The new clinic represents a £3 million investment in the area and will provide a range of vision correction services to patients. It is also creating new specialist jobs in Dartford, with Optical Express recruiting new Optometrists and Ophthalmic Surgeons to join the team.

The new treatment centre means patients can now receive a wider variety of treatments such as lens replacement or cataract surgery in Dartford, rather than having to travel into Central London for surgery.

The clinic will offer every patient a free consultation for laser or lens surgery which includes a comprehensive eye health check using the latest diagnostic equipment.

This new clinic is great news for Dartford and it was a pleasure to meet the Clinic Manager, Aaron Moffat and the Regional Director, Bilal Ahmed, along with other

members of the team who gave me a tour of the new facilities.

If you would like to find out more about Optical Express and the services it offers, please click on the link below.

[Optical Express](#)



Lower Thames Crossing community update video newsletter - Autumn 2020

For all the latest news on the progress of the Lower Thames Crossing, please click on the video above.

Information is provided on how SME's can tender for work on this exciting project,

together with an update about the recent Design Refinement Consultation and the forthcoming application for a Development Consent Order.



Opening of new Co-op at Castle Hill

It was a pleasure to open the new Co-op store at Castle Hill, Ebbsfleet and to meet the Store Manager, Scott Boast and his team.

This shop is a great addition to this growing community.



Pet theft debate

Over the last few years, I've been continually raising the need for pet theft reform.

Currently the theft of a pet is treated no differently under the Theft Act 1968, than a replaceable and inanimate object and yet we all know our pets are part of our family.

In 2016, I wrote to the Sentencing Council to ask it to change the guidelines so that there was less emphasis placed on the value of the piece of property that was stolen: in this case an animal. It came back to me and said the current guidelines were perfectly acceptable and even mentioned the fact that pedigree dogs are very often worth more than £500 and therefore it was not necessary to change the guidelines. I believe this is wrong and misses the point that this crime is devastating for both dog owners and the dogs themselves.

There has been a surge of cases of pet theft during lockdown and I believe it is now time for the Government to act. I highlighted this at a debate on Pet Theft recently and if you would like to view this, please click on the video link above.



Arrangements for exams and assessments in 2021

The Secretary of State for Education has now provided clarification for the arrangements for students due to take their examinations in 2021.

Students due to sit exams next summer have experienced considerable disruption to their education and following consultation with the sector, Ofqual and exam boards, most summer exams and assessments will start three weeks later than planned, without delaying students from progressing to their next stage of education or training. In addition to changes to the content of assessments for certain subjects set by Ofqual, this will give pupils extra time to prepare.

The Secretary of State has also recognised that a shorter exam window, when combined with the risk of self-isolation, may mean that some students miss exams. To mitigate this, he announced that one Maths and one English GCSE paper will take place before the May half term. This will ensure there is sufficient time between papers, allowing Year 11 pupils who need to self-isolate to sit at least one paper in these core subjects.

To ensure students can begin the following academic year as normal, results days for GCSE, AS, and A levels will take place across two days in the same week of August; AS and A levels on 24 August and GCSEs on 27 August.

Students studying level 2 and 3 vocational and technical qualifications for progression will receive their results no later than these dates. We also expect that, for the majority of vocational and technical qualifications taken alongside or instead of GCSE, AS and A level exams, awarding organisations will look to align timetables

with 2021 exams.

The Secretary of State has confirmed that he is working closely with Ofqual over the coming weeks to engage with teaching unions, exam boards and other stakeholders to develop contingencies for all scenarios that may impede students from sitting their exams fairly.

Brexit update

Brexit negotiations have recommenced between the UK and the EU in London.

There are still disagreements over some issues such as fishing and state aid. I hope that agreement can be found but whatever the outcome of these talks, the UK will leave the transition period on 31st December 2020.

Food Vouchers

An opposition day debate took place in the House this week relating to the extension of the Food Voucher Scheme. This was not about the extension of Free School Meals.

It was right the Government temporarily stepped in to provide support for children when most schools were closed. Now that the majority of children are back at school, we will be reverting to the system we have had for many years of schools providing meals free of charge to vulnerable children.

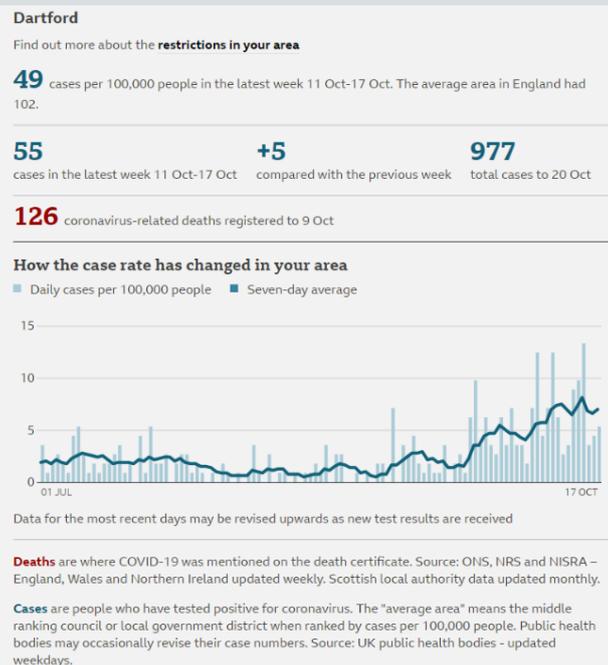
During this pandemic, the Government has recognised that additional hardship has fallen onto families. This is why we have increased Universal Credit by £86 per month to assist people in supporting their families and provided more taxpayer-funded assistance than any other country in Europe. I appreciate that some people feel that the Voucher Scheme should have continued but I feel that enabling families

to provide for their own children through the benefits system, or preferably wages, is the better way forward, rather than there being a dependence on vouchers.

US election

The US Presidential election will take place on Tuesday, 3rd November. Many Americans have already cast their vote by post which means there could be a longer delay than normal in finding out the result.

Whilst I have frequently criticised Donald Trump, we must continue to have a close working relationship with the US, whoever wins this election. America is arguably our closest ally and it is in both our countries' interests for this to persist.



Covid-19 cases in Dartford

Above is a graphic showing the current level of Covid-19 cases in Dartford. A link to the most up-to-date data can be found by clicking on the button below.

(A modern browser with JavaScript and a stable internet connection are required to view this data)

Covid-19 cases in Dartford



Remembrance Sunday and Poppy Appeal

In these extraordinary times, social distancing restrictions and limits on the number of people who can participate in outdoor events, mean the arrangements for the Remembrance Sunday service, parade and march past in Dartford, will be changing this year.

In line with Government guidelines, the commemoration in Dartford will include the two minute silence and wreath laying by a small party of six. This will be followed by the laying of wreaths by individual representatives of the organisations who normally participate in the traditional service and march past.

So that Dartfordians can still observe the ceremony safely, Dartford Borough Council is arranging for it to be filmed and live streamed on the internet.

For this year's Poppy Appeal, people are being encouraged to donate online and a link can be found here: <https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/ways-to-give/donate>



Atik

Anyone who has an over-18 in the house will probably be familiar with Atik in Dartford.

After months of being shut due to lockdown, Atik finally reopened its doors on 2nd October and I was invited along (earlier in the day!) to meet General Manager Jordan Craine.

It has been a challenging time for many sectors of our economy but particularly those operating in the night time industry. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to opening up this sector again.

I have spoken with Ministers in detail about the curfew and other measures which are in place. I understand they view the 10pm closing time as part of a package of measures that aim to strike a balance between what is reasonable and proportionate to slow the spread of the virus and taking into account usual human behaviour. I want to see this 10pm limit lifted as soon as we can so these restrictions must be reviewed regularly.



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