

## Gareth Johnson MP for Dartford

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

29th March 2021



### **Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill**

I recently voted to support the above Bill at second reading.

This Bill does not prevent protests, demonstrations, marches or vigils taking place. It does, however, restrict protests where they have a serious impact on other people such as what we experienced when Extinction Rebellion protests effectively closed down parts of London.

This Bill:

- increases sentences for child murderers
- doubles sentences for assaults on emergency workers
- increases the sentence available for causing death by dangerous driving, to life imprisonment

- increases sentences for desecrating war memorials to ten years imprisonment
- ensures rapists spend more time in prison
- gives greater powers to tackle knife crime
- tackles sexual abuse by persons in a position of trust
- restricts protests that have a serious impact on other people

Whilst there are certain provisions that require further examination and scrutiny, I support the general principle of what the Bill is trying to achieve.

There has been a significant amount of misleading information about what this Bill is seeking to change in relation to the laws around protest. This Bill does not remove the right to peacefully protest, nor does it prevent the ability to protest outside Parliament. The House of Commons Library has prepared a detailed briefing on this. The House of Commons Library is politically neutral and here is the link to the detailed summary of the proposed legislation:

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9164/>

The actions of Extinction Rebellion caused significant damage, shut down roads and public transport and such was the level of disruption, emergency services were restricted from being able to access hospitals.

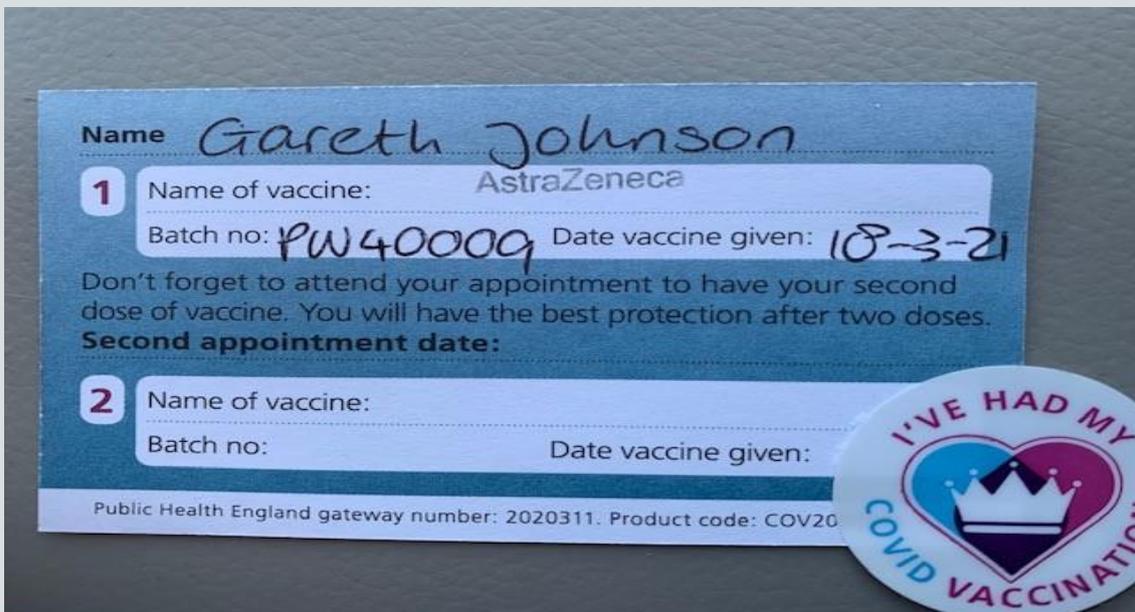
The provisions in relation to noise and the specific distress that can arise will also allow police to be better able to deal with protests such as the one outside St Thomas' Hospital on New Year's Eve, where a large group of protestors gathered to chant "Covid is a hoax" outside a hospital trust which at the time had no fewer than 311 Covid-19 patients fighting for their lives. Whilst this protest was non-violent, the level of distress caused to doctors and patients was self-evident.

I spoke during the debate on this Bill and a video link to my contribution can be found above.



## Lower Thames Crossing community video newsletter - March 2021

This edition provides an update about the planning application, current apprenticeship opportunities and ongoing survey works, as well as information about the plans to build the team who will deliver the crossing and how they will work with local businesses.



## Vaccinations

Over half of the UK's adult population have now received their first jab and I joined them recently, when bookings opened up to the over 50s.

Our world-beating vaccination programme is something we can all be proud of and

gives us a clear route out of the current restrictions.

All second doses will be offered within 12 weeks of the first jab and it is crucial we keep up the momentum by getting the second dose when contacted.

Thank you to all those who made this possible.



## **Debate in the House of Commons on the London Mayor's proposal for an outer London congestion charge**

On 23rd March I led a debate which I had secured on the proposal being investigated by the Mayor of London's office to charge all vehicles registered outside of London £3.50 every time they cross the boundary into any London borough.

This proposal has been met by widespread opposition from residents in Dartford and MPs close to London, as well as those living in the capital. A petition on the Change.org website currently has over 26,600 signatures.

I opened the debate by saying this charge would have a catastrophic impact on places like Dartford and all the areas surrounding London. It would also have a detrimental impact on outer London boroughs. Businesses located in outer London boroughs would suffer from people being reluctant to travel the often short distance, across the border to use that particular business.

During the debate, the Transport Minister, Rachel Maclean, confirmed that this is an

idea the Government does not support. She stated that it would be a border tax levied on people outside London by a Mayor they were not able to vote for or, indeed, vote out. She also said there should be no taxation without representation and as such a move would fly in the face of the Mayor's supposed mantra that London is open.

Dartfordians have absolutely no control over decisions made by the London Mayor. It is the most divisive issue ever conceived by a London Mayor and it needs to be stopped. It will have a profound impact, not just on the counties around London, but on the outer London boroughs. It is an abuse of power and it needs to end.

I am pleased to hear the Government is opposed to this proposal and I hope the strength of feeling against this plan, which has been illustrated through the petition and this debate, means the idea will be scrapped altogether.

If you would like to watch my contribution to the debate, please click on the video above.

## Number of people in Dartford claiming unemployment related benefits

### *The unadjusted count*

- **There were 4,205 actual claimants in Dartford constituency in February 2021, which was 5.6% of the population aged 16-64.** The equivalent UK claimant rate was 6.5%.
- This was 255 higher than January 2021 and 2,585 higher than February 2020, before the UK lockdown began. Note the majority of the increase happened in March-May at the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- There were 810 claimants aged 18-24 in February 2021, 20 higher than January 2021 and 500 higher than February 2020.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on employment around the globe and Dartford is no exception. Fortunately, Dartford was in a good position regarding employment before the pandemic struck and so whilst unemployment has risen in Dartford, it is still in a better position than most of the country.

As part of the government's response to the coronavirus (COVID-19), a number of enhancements were introduced to Universal Credit. These may have increased the number of employed people who are eligible for unemployment-related benefits.

Consequently, while some of the increase in the Claimant Count will be due to people who have become unemployed, some will also be due to employed people who have become eligible for Universal Credit as part of the government response.

The *Resolution Foundation* has [estimated](#) that only around half of the Claimant Count rise relates to those newly out of work.



Since 12th March, schools, colleges and universities can apply for funding to allow students to study and work across the globe as part of the new Turing Scheme.

The programme, backed by £110 million, replaces the Erasmus+ scheme in the UK and will fund 35,000 global exchanges from September 2021, including university study, school exchanges, and industry work placements.

The new scheme aims to improve social mobility, targeting students from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas which did not previously have many students benefiting from Erasmus+, making life-changing opportunities accessible to everyone across the country.

The Turing scheme [offers benefits](#) to students that they would not have under the previous Erasmus+ programme, with university students from disadvantaged backgrounds set to receive a maximum of £490 per month towards living costs (currently worth around 573 Euros compared to 540 Euros under Erasmus+), alongside travel funding, and other forms of additional funding to offset the cost of passports, visas and insurance.

Unlike Erasmus+, which is EU-focused, the Turing Scheme is a truly global programme and every country in the world is eligible to partner with UK universities, schools and colleges.

UK organisations are encouraged to form partnerships across the globe, not just with the EU. The Turing website includes the programme guide, funding levels and eligibility, and details of webinars available to help inform applications.

Successful applications will receive funding for administering the scheme and students taking part will receive grants to help them with the costs of their international experience. The benefits of the exchanges will be assessed and the findings used to build on future schemes. Funding decisions for subsequent years will be subject to future spending reviews.

£110m of funding will be available to support projects and activities during the 2021/2022 academic year. This is enough to fund similar levels of student exchanges under the former Erasmus+ scheme.

Programme guidance, including information on the application process, has also been published on the [Turing Scheme website](#).



## **Petition on behalf of Knockhall Primary School**

I was delighted to formally present a petition on behalf of Knockhall Primary School in the House of Commons. The petition, completed by Year 2 pupils and

their teacher, followed work they had done as part of a topic on bees and the impact of pesticides on them. If you would like to see me presenting the petition, please click on the video above.



## Hangloose Bluewater

You may have seen in the media, Hangloose Bluewater will be opening in the Spring, featuring England's longest and fastest zipwire experience. The zipwire will be opening in May and is over 700 metres long. Four people can fly side-by-side 'superman-style' and they will reach speeds of up to 60 mph. Towards the end of the ride, it is anticipated the riders will only be 2-3 metres above the lake, before they reach the landing pad. Riders must be at least 8 years old, with a minimum weight of 35 kg. The maximum weight for the experience is 120 kg.

Other attractions will be added, making Hangloose Bluewater the biggest adventure centre in Europe. These include England's only outdoor skydive, a giant 52-metre-high swing which can hold five people, a 7-storey giant slide and the UK's only permanent fixed bungee. There will also be a waterdrop bouldering wall and aerial trekking course.

If you would like to find out more, please click on the above video or on the website link.

[Hangloose Bluewater](#)



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