



Hello everyone,

For many it was a difficult Christmas and New Year as flooding affected large areas of the constituency and continues to cause problems. Despite the adversity, it was heart-warming to see how communities pulled together with robust and practical vigour of the sort we Brits are renowned for. Local volunteers worked tirelessly evacuating people, pets and belongings. Others were manning the tea urns and providing food and comfort for those who chose to remain in their homes. Looking forward, I have called for a roundtable meeting of key agencies on February 28th to consider long-term solutions, inviting representatives from the Environment Agency, National Flood Forum, Emergency Services, parish, borough and county councils, the NFU and key local individuals. I will update you on our discussions in the near future.

I would like to reassure you that the Government will do what is necessary to help families and communities get through this very difficult time - whether that's delivering extra pumps and sandbags, deploying the military or providing additional support for local emergency services. More information is available on the [Environment Agency](#) website if you are affected.

My regular surgeries will continue over the coming months in my new office premises in Knightrider Street in central Maidstone, full details of which can be found on my website.

It has been an action-packed few months in Westminster and the constituency, some highlights of which I have outlined for you below.

I pray for a sunny Spring and hope to see you in and around the constituency.

Very best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Helen".

Visit Kent!

One of my first visits as Tourism Minister was to join a team from [Visit Kent](#) at the popular 28-acre Kent Rural Heritage Experience, at Sandling, near Maidstone. Award-winning *Kent Life*, part of *The Continuum Group*, welcomes thousands of visitors each year keen to find out more about the history of the Garden of England and enjoy a lively calendar of special events for all the family. I had a really enjoyable day and look forward to working closely with *Visit Kent* in the future and shouting about our beautiful county and constituency to all who will listen!



Kent Artistic Roller Dance Club

On Friday 10th January I popped in to see a session at [Kent's Artistic Roller Dance Club](#) at the Maidstone YMCA and met up with skating coach Jackie Terenzi. Jackie has coached artistic skating for 35 years, with the club itself having produced British champions and international skaters! It was fantastic to see such enthusiasm and energy amongst the children - which the club takes from the age of six. Skating is a great and fun way to exercise, and while I briefly donned a pair of skates – my skating skills were no match for the club's group of talented youngsters!



Winter Shelter Campaign

Just before the New Year I helped to launch the Maidstone Churches' Winter Shelter Campaign, joining volunteers at the United Reformed Church. This important project, designed to offer homeless people in Maidstone a place to stay during the coldest months of the year, will initially operate until the 23rd February, and will see hospitality, a hot meal, and overnight shelter, being provided every evening. Seven church buildings are being used on a rolling basis, with the United Reformed Church, St Faith's, Quaker Hall, Maidstone Baptist Church, St Luke's, the Salvation Army Hall, and the Tonbridge Road Methodist Church, taking it in turns to accommodate people in need.



Chance to Shine

On Monday 10th February I was lucky enough to visit Brunswick House Primary in Maidstone to check out a brilliant initiative called [Chance to Shine](#). Chance to Shine aims to get children involved in cricket from primary level, and on the back of the fantastic result in the Women's Ashes Down Under, it was brilliant to see so many girls enjoying the game. It was great to meet England cricket captain Charlotte Edwards, as the Chance to Shine programme celebrated the news that it has brought the game to one million girls. Credit must go to head teacher Wendy Skinner and the fantastic teachers and coaches, all of whom made me very welcome. Let's hope the triumphant women's team can inspire the men to glory at the World Cup!



Ken Clarke Visit

In December I was delighted to welcome Cabinet Minister Ken Clarke to the constituency for a Christmas fundraising event. Ken is a true political heavyweight having served as an MP for over 40 years, and in the Cabinet as Education Secretary, Health Secretary, Home Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and most recently as Justice Secretary. During the event, Ken spoke in detail about the importance of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in creating growth and jobs in the UK. I took the opportunity to highlight the great work of [Anno Distillers](#), a small spirits producer based in Marden, and presented him with a bottle of their Anno Gin - which he was very happy with!



Mote Squash Club

Later in January I visited [Mote Squash club](#) for a knockabout and chat with some of the members for the club's open day. Squash is a brilliant game and an intense workout – perfect at this time of year, particularly with the recent weather. Including juniors, the club now boasts a membership of 180 people, and can count national and county champions, James Evans and Amelia Henley, as members. I'd love to see more children getting involved with the sport, especially as Britain boasts some of the world's best players in Laura Massaro and Nick Matthew. I know the club's chairman, David Verga, is really keen to get people of all ages playing and raise the profile of the game and I encourage anyone interested to get down to the club and check it out!



Christmas Card Competition

Before Christmas I ran a Christmas card competition inviting children in primary schools across Maidstone and The Weald to submit their designs to feature on my official Christmas card. I chose Tegan Salter, of Sandling Primary School as the winner from over 500 entries – I loved her depiction of Father Christmas on his sleigh with his reindeer flying through the night's sky. I was delighted to surprise her at a school assembly, presenting her with a large tin of chocolates, a House of Commons teddy bear, and a pencil case, rubber and ruler, as well as inviting Tegan, her parents, and Sandling School's art teacher, to pay a visit to Westminster. Thanks to everyone that entered - there were some superb drawings and I look forward to next year's competition!



KIXX Chinese Martial Arts

On the last Saturday in January I dropped in to visit [KIXX Chinese Martial Arts](#) in Maidstone and was given a tour of the club by Sifu Nigel Gilham. As a former judo enthusiast, I am well aware of the benefits of martial arts whether practiced for relaxation, fitness, health, self-defence, or simply a better sense of wellbeing. Growing up it definitely gave me confidence, and I know Nigel's work at the club is making a real difference, reflected by the club's Sport England Accreditation. KIXX caters for all levels and goals for everyone from four years of age upwards. I had a lot of fun and even managed to pick up a few tips from the children taking part!



WW1 Centenary

As a minister in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport I will be leading the Government's commemoration of one hundred years since the start of the First World War.

[Last month I travelled to Belgium as part of the preparations](#), visiting Saint Symphorien military cemetery near Mons. It was a truly moving experience, with the cemetery set naturally in the folds of a rolling landscape with many mature trees and shrubs, creating a palpable sense of serenity and reflection. There I saw the graves of both the first and last British casualties of the war, which poignantly face each other. On 4 August this year, Saint Symphorien will be one of three

sites where events will take place to mark the centenary of Britain's entry to the war. With the Government's focus for the centenary on remembrance, education and youth, I have written to primary and secondary schools in Maidstone and The Weald encouraging them to get involved in any way they can. I've had a great response so far and look forward to participating in activities in the constituency and across the country to mark this historic occasion.



Sport, sport, sport!

The next few months see an action-packed agenda in terms of sport with the Sochi Winter Olympics and Paralympics, Commonwealth games and Tour de France, not to mention the football World Cup! I will continue to champion the role of women in sport, something I care passionately about. Did you know that England have won the bid to host the [2018 Women's Hockey World Cup](#)? It seemingly went unnoticed, but it is fantastic news and brilliant for women's hockey and UK sport in general. And finally, a quick note to say - as I write this - Maidstone's very own Lizzy Yarnold (pictured) is going for gold in the women's skeleton in Sochi, good luck Lizzy!

