

Notes of speech to Rolvenden Parish Council 29 April 2021

Thank you for your invitation to speak tonight. I have not prepared a formal 'speech' but just wanted to share some observations and reflect on what has been a truly terrible and deeply challenging year for so many people.

When the Parish Council last met face to face in the Church last year the enormity of what we were facing was just dawning on us all. Both Mr Leggett, the headmaster and Rev'd Hodgkins were present and we got our heads together to plan a response. All of us knew we had to keep residents connected, safe and above all, fed. A daunting prospect with no infrastructure, no money and no information and none of us had ever dealt with a pandemic.

The speed and willingness with which people stepped forward to help was extraordinary. And at a time when to do so posed significant personal risk – there were no vaccines and precious few tests. It was immensely moving to witness and a testament to the resilience and strength of Rolvenden and the Layne. That strength and resilience has continued through all the challenges of this pandemic and when we are able to meet face to face, I will thank each volunteer personally. The written word cannot convey adequately how grateful I am and how honoured I feel to work with such an incredible group of people.

I will briefly update you on my role liaising and dealing with Ashford Borough Council. It can be challenging – resources are very tight but above all, I feel it is absolutely critical that we, as a rural, farming community, are not simply handed a 'one size fits all' approach. What might work in Ashford's urban core bears no relation to what is appropriate here and it is critical that I keep fighting our corner, politely but persistently. We are not asking for the moon but we are asking for our fair share of resources and funding and for our way of life and the things we value and love to be recognised and protected. The Chief Executive of Ashford Borough Council attended a challenging session with the Parish Council to answer your questions on planning, housing and other key parish matters. This, I believe, is the first time this has happened. I need to make sure it happens regularly with all the key decision makers so our point of view can be heard and taken on board.

I wish to thank two people who are both extremely modest and will probably squirm whilst I do so – firstly, Peter Setterfield, the highly qualified and experienced Parish Clerk who has navigated an ever-changing set of regulations and legislation to ensure that the Parish Council can continue to meet. And secondly, the Parish Chair, Denise Curtain. She has been the driving force throughout the entire pandemic response, whilst also ensuring that usual business is dealt with to her extremely high standards. Denise has kept us all going – there have been moments of real despair, especially in the awful winter months when Covid cases just kept mounting up and Denise never faltered. She is one of the most impressive people I have ever had the privilege of working with, driven by her love of this place and the people who live here.

Finally, I must deal with an issue that has consumed almost half of my Member's Grant, the £3,000 that Ashford make available to Borough members to spend in their wards. The remainder has gone to food banks, including Rolvenden's own Care Bear scheme. Ashford Borough Council have responsibility for the running of all Parish councils and on their advice, I have spent approximately £1,200 on engaging Hoey and Ainscough, a specialist consultancy, to advise on bullying at the Parish Council and to conduct a thorough review of all of its practices and procedures to bring it up-to-date.

The Parish Council has been absolutely key to the entire pandemic response and this experience has underlined how critical good local government is to a community's well-being. The report highlighted how well the Parish Council has recovered from the blow of the fraud and theft and has

emphasised how unacceptable the bullying has been. Its findings have been accepted by the Parish Council and work will take place to institute its recommendations.

Councillor Kate Walder