

I am unable to attend this evening but wish to welcome residents and representatives from our village institutions and groups to tonight's Annual Meeting - a celebration of all that our community achieves and an opportunity for residents to ask questions. Following significant surgery in February, I am now mobile & have restarted weekly surgeries at the market on Thursdays and will be arranging weekend & evening surgeries over the next few weeks both in Rolvenden & Rolvenden Layne. I can be contacted as always via email(kate.walder@ashford.gov.uk) or on my 'phone (07389110611).

I set out below a list of the work achieved last year & the issues which will be the focus of my work on residents' behalf as we move through 2025.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

TO describe the proposals set out in central government's White Paper of December 2024 as any type of reform, is in my view, misguided. The key issues facing local authorities (adult social care/children & special educational needs/Highways & transport/planning & housing) have been ignored in favour of sweeping proposals which seek to rush through the abolition of district authorities in favour of 3 or 4 Kent unitary authorities with virtually no guidance from central government. Any geographical, economic or historical cohesion will be lost and rural communities will be bolted on to bigger urban conurbations in Kent with an inevitable domination by these & an equivalent swallowing up of resources. Ashford Borough Council is by no means perfect but it is ALOT closer than Faversham or Swale. The refusal by central Government of KCC's request to be included in the fast track Mayoral Devolution programme gives a clear indication that what is afoot is driven by political considerations above all & a determination to increase central control, whatever fine words these proposals are dressed up in. I believe that we must focus on delivery for residents as much as possible and continue to point out & highlight the key issues and constraints affecting rural, village & agricultural communities by whatever means possible.

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

Thank you to the residents who have stepped up to join the Community Committee taking the update of the Rolvenden Neighbourhood Plan forward. Progress has been swift & focused, building on the excellent foundations of the existing Plan. This will endure whatever emerges from the Local Government changes & is the single most important planning work to be undertaken this year. Even if not applied in consultation it must be followed by the Planning Inspectorate. Please look out for updates on the Rolvenden Community page & get involved if you care about your village.

MONYPENNY/VICARAGE DEVELOPMENT

A meeting kickstarting discussions on the rebuilding & refurbishment of these key sites will take place in early May between Monypenny residents & the Housing Strategy Team at ABC. Anthony Crossley, Lisa Knight & the Monypenny scheme manager, Toni Burke, should also be in attendance. This is long overdue & a chance to reconsider & redraw earlier proposals which were not acceptable.

CRIME & ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Last year's outbreaks were deeply alarming, and I am extremely grateful to Peter New of Neighbourhood Watch for his tireless support in turning the tide & securing police support. Peter & I have a meeting scheduled next week to plan for the better weather & to track emerging trends in criminality & please remember that household burglaries are now focused on document theft. A stray utility bill is of far greater use to a criminal than any amount of household goods. We are planning workshops & talks to keep residents informed & safe & many thanks to Sian for the essential work that she does on our behalf. As Portfolio Holder for Community Safety & Chair of the Community Safety Strategy Group, I am working to ensure that policing resources - severely stretched - are allocated fairly across the Borough. The Rural officers - two in total for the Borough - do their best but are simply spread far too thin. Residents can contact me at any time if they need any assistance or guidance should they fall victim to criminality or have any concerns.

PLANNING

As a member of ABC's planning committee I do not comment publicly on undecided planning decisions as to do so would remove my right to vote. I am available to assist any resident, either applicants or those with concerns, privately. Target numbers for new development are a subject of deep concern but as mentioned above, a Neighbourhood Plan, strong representations at the earliest opportunity & an understanding of what actually counts in planning decisions remain our best guarantee of a better result. I read in detail every Application submitted. The Biodiversity & Wildlife Task Group, led by Councillor Linda Harman as Planning Cabinet member & myself, is working to produce the best protections possible under current legislative regimes. Central government is in an almighty rush to deliver new housing but our High Weald AONB national status & the work of the Task Group provide some but not total protection. Recent decisions are essential reading & provide some grounds for hope. And I have recently joined the High Weald AONB Advisory Group as ABC's representative & have the advantage of access to their expert professional planning help.

The vast majority of my work is individual casework on residents' behalf which of course, is completely confidential. Contact me at any time for assistance, guidance or to talk a problem through. Tonight is a testament to the strength of our community even in these most uncertain times. Problems are becoming more complex, more urgent & help harder & harder to access. I have been working with the Mildred Trust in Tenterden to roll out a new social supermarket, able to visit the villages & assist with a wide range of issues where people live. This includes health, debt & financial advice. We will be holding a village event later this year.

The above is a brief overview- do not hesitate to contact me if I can assist further - my role is to assist residents first & foremost & it remains a huge privilege to be able to do so.

Kate Walder