

I am writing this after the first full week of parliament's return, when all MPs have been present. While I had been going down to London Monday-Thursday once it was permitted again, some MPs have not been physically in the House of Commons for nearly 18 months. All of us who were attending physically had been subject to a socially distanced chamber with only a fraction of MPs allowed in and all committee meetings were on Zoom.

The place is now transformed, with much more atmosphere; proper debates where people can 'intervene on' (interrupt to politely make a counterpoint) each other; and I for one felt our first Education Committee meeting was much more focussed and better for being able to put ministers and their officials under scrutiny. Virtual parliament is better than no parliament, but a lot is lost.

With the exception of a few days in Yorkshire and a couple of days in Norfolk, I spent most of recess at home in Didcot. There were some great events just before we returned. One was the Longworth Church Fete, which had a good turnout and good weather, a very competitive dog show and classics like a tombola and coconut shy. Another was a tea party at the Almshouse of Robert Stiles in Wantage, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Almshouse Association. Almshouses have existed in the UK for more than 1000 years and provide low-cost housing to the local community. They have something in common with fetes in that both are run by volunteers. And, as with the return of parliament, they give a taste of what's been missed through Covid.

I know that the pressure on GP services continues to be a bugbear. Over the summer, I met with both the Wantage surgeries and chaired a larger meeting of the Didcot surgeries, Clinical Commissioning Group, Patient Participation Group reps and the District Council in Didcot. The long-overdue expansion of Mably Way in Wantage has just had a step forward after a meeting of the CCG: the business case has been approved and the planning application has been submitted. In Didcot, there is both the particular short-term need presented by the new houses at sites such as Great Western Park and a longer-term need given the expected population growth. In broad terms there's agreement about what we need. My job is to do all I can to try and ensure we get it.

Other recent meetings of note were with some residents of Appleford and some residents of Sutton Courtenay. The Appleford meeting was specifically about the location of the relief road and the desire of the group to see it moved 200m to where Oxfordshire County Council were originally going to put it. I think there is a compelling case for this and have contacted the County Council with the points the group wanted raised. The Sutton Courtenay meeting was a broader one about the development that has taken place and promised improvements that have still not arrived – at my request, they're giving me a task list of things they'd like me to do!

A final mention for a couple of charities. Adrian is an ambassador for the Stroke Association and runs a group in Grove. He can deliver free of charge presentations to groups of any age about the risk factors for having a stroke. The other is Root and Branch, near Shrivenham, which runs outdoor activities for those with mental health difficulties. I visited this month and they need volunteer blacksmiths/metal workers to help run classes for those that use the service. Do get in touch if you can help – or indeed, as ever, if you'd like to contact me about anything else:

david.johnston.mp@parliament.uk