Newsletter from James MacCleary MP for Lewes Constituency

August Newsletters

Week 1

Last week was another busy week on my summer village tour, with visits across the constituency and conversations about everything from water shortages and rural transport to planning and local services. I've also been trying to get to the bottom of the mystery of Plumpton's disappearing post box and speaking out following deeply disturbing allegations surrounding the army training college for teenagers in Harrogate.

Summer tour

The second week of my summer tour has reinforced just how many challenges our rural communities are facing.

Wherever I've gone, residents have raised concerns about water shortages, sewage infrastructure and whether our systems are fit for the future as we face a changing climate. Rural transport remains a major issue too, with many villages worried about unreliable train services, poor bus connections and dangerous roads.

Road safety has been a recurring theme, from speeding in Upper Dicker and dangerous parking in Glynde to concerns about motorbike noise around East Dean and road rage linked to the disruption at Exceat. Residents have also spoken about the pressures that new housing developments place on local infrastructure, and concerns that villages could lose their voice under the new unitary council arrangements.

I've taken away a long list of actions, including pressing GTR over train services at Glynde and Berwick, following up with ministers on road safety concerns, and raising residents' concerns about planning, healthcare and infrastructure with the relevant authorities.

One of the best parts of the tour is hearing directly from people about the issues affecting their communities. Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to come along and speak with me.

As before, for security reasons I'm unable to publish the dates and times of future visits online. If you'd like to know when I'll be visiting your village, please contact your parish council.

Plumpton's disappearing post box

I thought I'd include this story to show an example of some of the bizarre and frustrating things I encounter as your MP.

During my visit to Plumpton this week, I went to visit the post box which I'd been told had been replaced with a shiny new solar-powered parcel box.

But when I went to inspect it myself, the old box was still very much out of action and sealed shut - with no new solar powered unit in sight. Now after getting in touch with them, Royal Mail appears to be claiming that the post box doesn't exist at all.

I can confirm that it does in fact exist. Here's me next to it.

So now we're back to square one, and instead of Plumpton having a functioning post box here, we have to now prove it exists at all.

Jokes aside, rural communities deserve reliable postal services, not disappearing post boxes, mixed messages and broken promises. I'll keep pressing Royal Mail for answers and, more importantly, a real functioning post box.

Army college allegations

Last week the BBC reported allegations of rape, sexual assault and harassment at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate, where recruits join at just seventeen years old.

The allegations are horrific. There can be no place for abuse, discrimination or a culture of silence in our armed forces, least of all in an institution responsible for training teenagers.

Every woman serving our country deserves to feel safe and respected. That's why I've called for the Ministry of Defence to launch a full independent inquiry into the culture and safeguarding practices at the college, and to ensure that serious cases are handled by civilian courts. Talk of opening a second site in the South East can't go further until we're confident people won't suffer the same way they did in Harrogate

The armed forces perform an extraordinary service for our country, but that service depends on trust and accountability. Those who have spoken out deserve to be heard, and the Government must act decisively to ensure these failures are never repeated.

Week 2

In this week's newsletter I wanted to focus on the recent train derailment in Lewes, with a worthy congratulations at the end to all the students receiving their exam results.

The train incident could have had even more dire consequences, but thanks to a bit of luck and the incredible response of our emergency services and local community there have been no fatalities, and the two people in hospital are not in a life threatening condition. Later in this newsletter I also touch on the implications of this event, both climate and practical, and my thoughts on how we need to move forward and take the precautions necessary to stop it happening again.

I have been on various news outlets over the last 24 hours, one clip from LBC is available here.

Lewes train derailment

Thursday afternoon we received the shocking news that a passenger train had derailed just outside Lewes.

Around 150 people were on board when three carriages left the tracks. Twenty people were taken to hospital, including two who suffered serious injuries. Thankfully, there were no fatalities, and I understand that the two people who remain in hospital are not in a life-threatening condition.

My thoughts are first and foremost with everyone who was on that train, particularly those who were injured and their families. What happened will have been an incredibly frightening experience.

I also want to pay tribute to our emergency services, railway staff and everyone involved in the response. They worked in extremely difficult conditions to get passengers to safety and care for those who were injured.

The response from people in Lewes was also remarkable. Residents and local businesses came forward with water, refreshments and whatever help they could offer to passengers in extremely hot conditions. It showed our community at its very best.

There will now rightly be serious questions about how this happened. Images from the scene show severely distorted and buckled track, although investigators have not yet established whether that was the cause of the derailment or a result of it. The Rail Accident Investigation Branch is now carrying out a full investigation, and it is important that we allow them to establish the facts before jumping to conclusions.

Concerns had already been raised about this stretch of railway and precautions were put in place because of this and because of the heat with trains subject to speed restrictions on the route. Those restrictions may ultimately have helped prevent an even more serious outcome, and also underlines that the risks posed by the extreme temperatures were already known and being actively managed.

We should not prejudge the investigation, but we do need to ask a bigger question about how resilient our railway is to a changing climate. Heatwaves like this are becoming more frequent and our infrastructure needs to be capable of coping with them. We cannot simply accept increasingly severe disruption, emergency speed restrictions and greater risks every time temperatures climb.

Other countries are already adapting. In France they are beginning to install next-generation rails engineered to better absorb extreme heat and reduce the risk of deformation. If our neighbours are investing now to make their railways more resilient to hotter summers, we should be asking why we are not moving with the same urgency here.

Once we know exactly what caused this derailment, there must be a serious look not only at what happened on this particular stretch of track, but at what investment is needed across our rail network to make it resilient for the decades ahead. I will be pushing for answers about the warnings and inspections before the incident, the precautions that were in place, and what more needs to change.

For now, my priority will be making sure residents receive clear information as the investigation and recovery work continue.

Thanks again to all of the emergency staff, residents and businesses that responded on Thursday, it showed the strength of our community when it came together to face a crisis.

Congratulations to our students

This week was also results day for young people across our area receiving their A-level, BTEC and T-Level results.

A huge congratulations to everyone who got the results they were hoping for after years of hard work, and thank you to the teachers, families and school staff who have supported them along the way.

I also know results day doesn't go exactly to plan for everyone. If you didn't get the grades you hoped for, please don't think that one set of results defines what comes next. There are plenty of different paths in life and different routes into university, further education, apprenticeships and work that can get you where you want to be.

You can also appeal your exam results if you believe them to be unfairly graded, please see advice for that here.

Whatever comes next, I wish all of our young people across the constituency the very best for the future.

Week 3

It's been good to be out and about across the constituency again this week for the final leg of my summer tour! I hope you've all managed to enjoy some of the sunshine over the past few weeks, although I suspect I'm not the only one who's been relieved to finally see some rain.

Train derailment

A week on from the derailment outside Lewes, the recovery operation has made significant progress. The derailed carriages have now been removed, and work is underway to repair the damaged track and make the railway safe for trains to run again. Network Rail expects the line to reopen on the 1st of September.

Over the past week, I have met with Rail Minister Lord Hendy, as well as representatives from Network Rail, Greater Thameslink Railway, the British Transport Police and those involved in the recovery effort, to discuss both the immediate response and the longer-term questions that this incident has raised.

The independent Rail Accident Investigation Branch is continuing its investigation, and we must allow that process to establish exactly what caused the derailment. But what has happened here is deeply concerning.

I had raised concerns about this particular stretch of track before the derailment. Many regular passengers will recognise that the ride along this section could be notably rough, and I had received reports from constituents raising concerns about its condition. Travelling the route regularly myself, I have previously shared those concerns and raised them with the relevant bodies.

Whilst we await the conclusion of the full investigation, we should still consider the much bigger question here about the way transport investment is distributed around the country.

Too often, the South East is treated as though it is simply an extension of London. On paper, investment in London and the South East can look enormous. But that disguises the reality for communities like ours in East Sussex, where ageing infrastructure, unreliable services and poor connections have been allowed to persist and worsen.

Earlier this year, **I raised this investment problem and it's results in Parliament during a debate on transport in the South East**. Our region makes an enormous contribution to the national economy, but communities outside London cannot continue to miss out because investment in the capital makes the figures for the wider South East look healthier than they really are.

Last week's derailment has shown the declining condition and resilience of our railway. It comes after the extreme heat raised serious questions about how well our national infrastructure is equipped for a changing climate, but also the need for sustained investment in the basic infrastructure people rely on every day in the South East.

More broadly, this shows why East Sussex cannot continue to be lumped in with London when decisions about investment are made. The South East should be helping to drive our economy forward, yet too often our communities are overlooked while investment in London masks the very different reality here. Whether it is our railways or our roads, this derailment should serve as a wake-up call. You cannot expect our region to keep contributing as much as we do to the national economy while the basic infrastructure we rely on is allowed to deteriorate and grind us to a halt.

Getting trains running again will be good. Getting the answers and investment needed to make sure something like this does not happen again will take longer, and I intend to keep pushing until we get them.

Summer tour

This week marked the final stretch of my summer tour, bringing to an end several weeks of travelling across the constituency and holding open meetings in our rural communities.

While my time can get sucked into the orbit of the larger towns in the constituency where the majority of my constituents live, it's really important to me that all my constituents have their concerns heard. This is particularly important at a time when the impacts of our changing climate are being increasingly felt, particularly in rural areas where water scarcity is a major problem.

We've talked about everything from roads, buses and local health services to housing, water and planning. Some issues have been very local, while some like our water or the state of our national politics have come up again and again.

I'm grateful to everyone who took the time to come along. My team and I have and will be continuing to follow up on the issues raised at each stop. If I haven't been to your village, please contact your local parish council, a few areas requested a visit another time of the year and do have some visits scheduled in October.

Thanks again to everyone who came along and made this year's summer tour such a worthwhile few weeks.

Surgery in Newhaven

This week I spent a couple of hours at Sainsbury's in Newhaven holding one of my regular drop-in supermarket surgeries. It was great to speak with residents about a wide range of local and national issues, and it seemed like a good opportunity to remind people that I hold these informal events regularly across the constituency.

Unfortunately, for security reasons, I'm not always able to publicise them as widely as I would like. However, if you follow me on Facebook, I often post updates when I'm out and about, including details of upcoming drop-in sessions.

These supermarket surgeries are completely informal. There's no need to book an appointment or even have a specific issue you'd like to discuss. If you see me, please do come over and say hello.

Alongside these drop-in events, I also hold regular appointment surgeries for constituents who would like to discuss a particular issue in more detail or need assistance with a case. If you would like to arrange an appointment, please email me at **james.maccleary.mp@parliament.uk**.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

James MacCleary
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Liberal Democrats