

Incredibly, in May this year I will have been your local MP for six years! I can't believe how quickly it has gone. I had a flick back over the columns for previous Januarys and there are running themes throughout; themes of optimism for the year ahead with a tinge of caution about the challenges we face.

I can apply these themes locally, nationally or even internationally but this year I can also do it personally with my first baby due in February. I started this column reflecting that six years has flown by and now realise how quickly my remaining six weeks will too. It is enough to bring on heart palpitations! Thankfully the one bit of me that is organised is the bit that matters to readers – how it all works with an MP on maternity leave.

It seems I will be the first Kent MP to give birth in office although some male colleagues have over the years become fathers, like Hugh Robertson in the neighbouring constituency. People say how will you cope to which my answer is like every other professional woman who has a baby!

There are of course some differences. The main one being MPs don't actually get maternity leave. We are not "employed" so as such we have no statutory rights. What does happen though is that I get leave from Parliament, meaning I won't have to go up to town every week, unless I am recalled for urgent votes. Instead, as from the end of January, I will operate from home or the local office, subject to the general pressures or duties of becoming a new mother. The office will operate as normal and pick up the immediate work, such as urgent casework, as the team do if I am away or tied up.

As constituents you should see no difference whatsoever and must continue to get in touch with any problems or issues you need help or comment on. In the meantime, the only thing I can be sure of is that time will fly by!