



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Dear Home Secretary, Communities Secretary and Justice Secretary,

We are writing to you today about the problems residents have been experiencing in our constituencies with illegal encampments.

Situation in Harlow

In Harlow, residents have been under siege with 70 illegal encampments being set up in the last year. I have been contacted by hundreds of residents in distress, with stories of antisocial and intimidating behaviour committed by the occupiers of the illegal sites. Furthermore, each time the illegal camps are moved on, the occupants have simply moved to another area, whilst leaving the original sites in a messy state. To date, Harlow Council has spent over £40,000 of taxpayer's money dealing with this problem, and over 2,000 people in Harlow have signed a petition demanding urgent action.

Situation in Thurrock

This problem is echoed in Thurrock where we have had a succession of illegal encampments across the borough. Some have been in place for well over a year. Some have arrived as recently as this weekend. The failure to deal with these settlements is causing considerable nuisance and distress to local residents, and undermining their confidence in law and order. The multiplicity of agencies with responsibilities is leading to a lack of prompt action. For example in the illegal disposal of waste. This is hazardous, leads to more burden on taxpayers for the clean up and is a criminal matter. Without prompt enforcement this activity will continue.

Failure of the Authorities

Failure of the Chief Constable of Essex Police

We believe that there has been a significant failure of the Chief Constable for Essex to uphold the law and deal with this problem effectively. Although there have been some examples of local police officers going above and beyond their duties to help residents, we have also received many complaints from constituents who say that allegations they have made have not been taken seriously. In Harlow, the police have seemed reluctant to act, seemingly because of human rights legislation about those individuals setting up illegal encampments. To date, there have been 73 illegal encampments in Harlow, but only 10 Section 61 Notices served.

Generally speaking we find a reticence on the part of Essex Police to formally intervene. There appears to be a practice that in the absence of sufficient traveller pitches, the police cannot enforce using the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. Surely this is nonsense. By contrast a local councillor in Thurrock was subject to an investigation by the police for 'inciting racial hatred' after demanding that the council take enforcement action against a site in his ward which had been refused planning permission.

When the public who abide by the law see it being flagrantly breached without consequence they lose faith in the police. When they then see someone face potential criminal charges for daring to speak out they lose even more. There is something very wrong with how Essex Police is dealing with this problem.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

We believe there should be an inquiry as whether the Chief Constable is upholding the law fully and whether the policy of Essex Police is appropriate. At the very least there should be clear direction about how the police service should be dealing with illegal encampments. We should also consider whether the law is fit for purpose in this area.

Failure of the Police and Crime Commissioner

The challenge should of course come from the Essex Police and Crime Commissioner. It is our opinion that he has failed in his role to represent the views of residents in Essex, and hold the Chief Constable to account over his failure to act. There is no clear strategy in dealing with this. Despite residents suffering in Harlow for over one year, he has made few visits to Harlow about this issue.

An investigation should be launched into whether he is upholding his public duty. As the public's representative it is his job to ensure that policing is upholding the law in Essex and to give challenge to the chief Constable where it is failing. When we introduced Police and Crime Commissioners it was to establish clear accountability. It has not been effective in this case.

Failure of Authorities

Although the Harlow Antisocial Behaviour Team have been outstanding and have done more than any other authority to deal with the problem in Harlow, working extremely hard 24 hours a day for over a year, we believe that the Councils also have extensive laws that can be used. However there does seem to be some confusion as to exactly what laws are able to be used by the Council and what laws are to be used by the police. It would be helpful if this could be clarified.

In Thurrock the Council has been slow to use its enforcement powers. There must be clear guidance given to local authorities which tells them their obligations under the law. In respect of the illegal waste, there are also functions that fall to the Environment Agency.

We both believe that the Council should also pursue the perpetrators who set up illegal camps that then lead to huge clean up costs at the expense of the taxpayer for compensation.

We would appreciate advice as to how this could happen.

Court Delays

In Harlow, one of the difficulties faced by the Anti-social Behaviour Team when moving on the occupants has been the length of time it has taken to secure a court hearing. The average waiting time for a hearing date has been 7 days, but has been as long as 14 days in some cases. Harlow Council has reported that this leads to more rubbish to clear, and more complaints from residents.

We would be grateful if you could look at whether anything could be done to prioritise cases such as these.

Conclusion



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

It is our understanding that there are relevant laws that could be used to tackle this issue including laws on trespass, highways and antisocial behaviour. Given the adverse effect that not using these powers properly are having on the people of Essex, we urge you to hold an inquiry looking at the actions of both the Chief

Constable, and the Police and Crime Commissioner, to see what lessons should be learnt, and what more can be done. We would also appreciate advice on how councils can act more effectively.

The residents of Harlow and Thurrock have suffered enough, and it is time that immediate action is taken and the law upheld.

Very best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jackie Doyle-Price'.

Jackie Doyle-Price MP

Robert Halfon MP

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robert Halfon'.