

Date: 1<sup>st</sup> August 2020

The Hon Giles Watling, MP  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

Sent via email  
[giles.watling.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:giles.watling.mp@parliament.uk)

Dear Giles,

Thank you for your letter and for raising your concerns directly with me. I have asked Essex Police for a report on the current situation on the Greensward area of Frinton-on-Sea and for them to contact you to keep you informed of the situation. I would also like to address your concerns about the handling of unauthorised encampments more generally.

One of my first actions as Commissioner was to bring together all the relevant groups who handle unauthorised encampments across Essex to establish an agreed approach. Like you, I believe that law abiding communities should not have to put up with illegal activity and I was frustrated by the inconsistent, and at times weak, response.

As well as supporting the development of this shared approach the Chief Constable and I also established the Rural Engagement Team whose remit is to work with communities across Essex to tackle rural crime, including providing a robust and consistent approach to unauthorised encampments. This team was established in 2017 and the current Chief Constable and I announced last year that, because of the success of the team, we would be doubling its size.

These two initiatives, the shared protocol and the establishment of the Rural Engagement Team, have resulted in a huge drop in unauthorised encampments across the county, from 365 in 2017 to 201 in 2019; in the current year there have been just 65. This is real progress and demonstrates the seriousness with which I and the Chief Constable approach the matter. While many encampments are peaceful and law abiding where this isn't the case it is right that the Police use their powers to move people on and also identify and tackle any criminal activity that is happening. The team are working hard to get the message across that Essex is not the place to come and commit crime.

However, the police must still work within the existing legislation. While at the moment I am confident that Essex Police are using the powers they have to their full effect I no longer believe these powers are sufficient to deal with the unauthorised encampments in a way that the majority of our communities would expect. During the recent Home Office consultations into the treatment of unauthorised encampments I spent a considerable amount of time listening to those in our communities who are most affected. Following this engagement, I submitted a strong response supporting the criminalisation of trespass (the 'Irish option'), as this change in law would simplify the current eviction process. It is my view that unless the police's powers are significantly improved, and they are provided with the resources to implement these changes, the handling of these sites will fall short of the expectations of our communities. I would therefore urge you to strongly consider supporting this option in parliament whenever there is opportunity to do so.

In terms of the temporary guidance issued for handling unauthorised encampments during the COVID-19 pandemic I can reassure you that the Chief Constable and I, after receiving an early draft of the guidance, provided strong feedback to ensure a more robust approach was taken. I have attached the revised guidance for your information. At no time did Essex Police stop using the powers available to them to evict unauthorised encampments; the only change during the first months of the pandemic, was to additionally consider the impact of Covid-19 (and the potential impact of moving an authorised encampment) when assessing whether or not section 61 should be applied. The use of section 61 was at no time suspended.

You mention in your letter the comment by the Chief Constable which was misrepresented in the national media. Following this inaccurate media report, you will have received a letter from the Chief Constable setting out his position and clarifying that the statement was incorrect.

Over the last few years, working together we have achieved a great deal. Your support and leadership in 2017 was critical in getting approval for the removal of the cap on the policing precept. As a direct result of this we have been able to recruit 368 extra as well as well as the 151 officers we are currently recruit for this year as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> wave of the government's 20,000 extra officers. In total, by the end of March 2021 we will have recruited over 500 extra officers significantly growing Essex Police.

Because of your work there are now Town Centre Teams, more officers dedicated to tackling gangs and serious crime, a new Business Team, schools' officers and an expanded Rural Engagement Team.

These extra officers have allowed us to develop a better police force that is more connected to the communities it serves. Not aloof but connected. I want to reassure you that many of those changes, such as the investment in frontline, preventative and highly visible officers, and stronger enforcement activities would not have happened as successfully without the strong support and indeed leadership of our current Chief Constable.

Your leadership in the House, our combined support for change and the Chief Constable's leadership of his team within the force work well together. This robust leadership is having a direct affect. It is resulting in a reduction in the number of unauthorised encampments, a fivefold increase in stop and search and in the recent high profile bust of a serious

organised crime gang which had been operating in Essex. The Chief Constable often talks about “catching baddies” to his team and that clear robust message is well understood within the force.

There will always be incidents which do not go the way we want them to and it is important that we review and learn the lessons from these; there is also more to be done, such as the introduction of a transit site in the county, which would increase the eviction powers available to the Police. It is important, however, that we recognise the huge strides forward we have made together and the continued progress we can continue to make through a shared vision and collaborative approach.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Roger', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Roger Hirst  
Police Fire and Crime Commissioner