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Richard Benyon MP
House of Commons
Westminster
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25th April 2019

Dear

Richard

Working together to improve the law on unauthorised encampments

As we enter spring we are also entering the seasons for the increase in unauthorised encampments. Already over the Easter weekend we saw a number of sites, mostly on private land, across the Thames Valley.

As you will know the public expectation of action by the police is not matched by legislation. I am concerned that this not only causes problems in individual cases where communities experience significant nuisance or worse, but also may lead to a general lack of confidence in policing as the public do not understand the limited powers the police have.

Last year the Government consulted on the powers to tackle unauthorised encampments, Thames Valley Police responded to the consultation as did I on behalf of the PCC. The Government have now announced their intention to amend the law to give greater powers to the police and local authorities.

Also some ideas have been outlined which I would welcome the detail of the proposed changes, and just as significantly the timetable for implementing them, is not yet clear. Clearly parliamentary time is extremely limited at the moment but I want to ensure that the Thames Valley is at the forefront of shaping these changes.

In the meantime Thames Valley Police have made significant progress with local authorities in establishing a joint protocol to better coordinate the response to unauthorised encampments. The lack of transit sites in the Thames Valley is one of the issues that limits the powers that the police have at their disposal and one of the issues that I believe needs to be addressed.

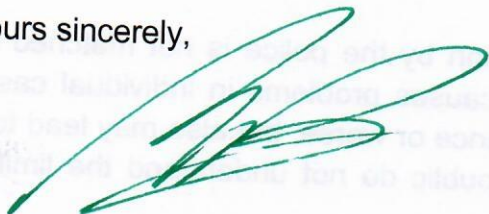
I will continue to encourage the police to do everything they can to use their powers within the existing system in order to limit the harm to communities from unauthorised encampments, but the system is flawed and I welcome the opportunity being offered by the Government to change it.

The policing of unauthorised encampments is a complicated matter, usually involving civil law rather than criminal. Undoubtedly many law abiding members of the traveller community suffer significant discrimination and the police must also serve these communities. That is however no excuse to overlook breaches of the law and the undeniable harm to settled communities that can be caused by unauthorised encampments.

I have met with representatives of the traveller community, many of whom would welcome an improved relationship with the police. I will continue this dialogue and would hope this would inform improved public policy. The law abiding members of both the settled and traveller communities do not wish to see criminality go unpunished.

Once the Government has published detailed proposals I hope that you will be willing to meet with me and your fellow MPs from across the Thames Valley, along with officers from the Force. The system that operates at the moment is not working. Thames Valley Police will continue to do their best within the system that exists, but we are faced with an opportunity to shape the changes to that system. I hope that we can work together to secure the changes that are needed to better serve your constituents.

Yours sincerely,



Matthew Barber
Deputy Police & Crime Commissioner