

Building Trust from the Ground Up

Sir Peter Bottomley MP

Worthing Herald Article

28th July 2022

When unauthorised caravans and cars occupy communal, private or public land, I try to see the situation for myself. Residents and I know the series of incursions that have been made from Goring-by-Sea across Ferring and towards Kingston, East Preston and Rustington, and up to Angmering.

I have reported the situation to the Home Secretary, asking her to meet police, council and resident representatives.

Groups travelling east and west along the coast seem to be crossing or stopping in our part of West Sussex. Late last week, I met residents and the Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) where Worthing Borough Council borders Arun District Council.

I have been reflecting on deprived communities and, separately, on all that PCSOs have contributed in past decades. Dr Laura Brassington of the University of Sussex for the Higher Education Policy Institute has recently written about gypsies, Roma and travellers (GRT) as the ethnic minorities most excluded from UK education.

Her report suggests there are 4-500,000 GRT in the UK, with 660 in higher education, about a quarter of the number there could be. She writes about poor educational outcomes within the context of higher rates of bullying, prejudice and racial discrimination experienced by GRT communities.

I do not agree with her words: "The hostile climate will be exacerbated by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (2022) which is expected to have a disproportionately harmful impact on GRT communities. Part Four of the Act changes 'trespass' from a civil to a criminal offence, and grants police the power to confiscate homes from GRT communities when they stop in places not designated for them."

My first wish is to accept the helpful offer by our Police and Crime Commissioner Katy Bourne to meet locally with community representatives about our recent adverse experiences. Then, perhaps we can ask the University of Sussex experts to hear the impact of unauthorised caravans and cars encamping the greensward, the recreation grounds and other valued much-used local spaces. What would they say to residents who obey the rules, accept adverse decisions when their planning applications are declined and who pay up when charged for overstaying at a parking space in town?

No one locally has expressed discriminatory views to me. Everyone wants effective action to prevent or to end occupations.

At Marine Drive, people enjoying a walk or exercising a dog too often suffered aggravating challenge by young couples driving in circles across the greensward. In unnecessarily aggressive terms, people were wrongly told they could not take photographs. No one was trying to film a child. Some were recording the vehicles.

I was standing 100 yards from the extended group of vehicles. Many were modern and smart. There did not seem to be any reason why the occupants could not join the Caravan Club, making bookings at serviced sites.

While discussing the situation with two PCSOs, a car with three people came on a wandering line towards us. A young man lowered his window and started a rather one-sided conversation. I thought it verged on a rant. He spoke almost continuously for fifteen minutes.

He asked why I was interested in the situation. He challenged the PCSOs. He left the car, coming to stand unnecessarily close to us. When a walker crossed the grass, he returned to the car and circled round, being mildly offensive to a local resident peacefully enjoying the day.

PCSOs provide a highly visible police presence. Unison, the public service union, have produced an interesting pamphlet celebrating 20 years of Police Community Support Officers, a force for good. I agree people respect their in-depth knowledge of local areas and their approachability, with the highest proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic new joiners.

Lives would be better if GRT people come to join PCSOs. It can help to reduce difficulties and to make life better for all.