

Unauthorised Encampments

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I thank my hon. Friend for the measured tone that she has set for this debate. Does it surprise her that there are often examples of forced entry clearly having been used—for example, angle grinders on gates or huge boulders dragged to the side, sometimes in front of witnesses? Does she agree that the police need much greater powers to intervene and move people on where that is happening?

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Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I am disappointed that Laura Pidcock dismisses the issue as a clash of cultural norms. That does a great disservice to the Gypsy and Traveller community. I do not believe that incidents of criminal damage, environmental degradation, intimidation, fly-tipping and, in some cases, violence are cultural norms for that community; we are talking about a very tiny minority. As we have heard repeatedly in the debate, this is about ensuring the same rights, responsibilities and respect for everybody.

In the short time available, I will not repeat the many points that have been made, but propose to the Minister a solution-focused approach. We need much greater clarity about the police's powers to deal with witnessed criminal damage, because they are sometimes unsure of their own powers when criminal damage is reported or even when it happens in their presence.

So much revolves around dialogue. As has been said, meeting people and talking to them is important, but it can sometimes be difficult to know who to liaise with. During the consultation, will the Minister consider introducing a responsibility for someone to be appointed to speak for groups of Travellers and to liaise with them directly? That would allow us not only to advance the dialogue more constructively, but to hold somebody genuinely accountable.

That is about holding people to account, just as we would expect members of the local community to be held to account vigorously for intimidation of, or disrespect towards, the Traveller community. We still expect someone to be responsible for a group of people involved in the kinds of incidents that we have heard about today, such as fly-tipping. At the moment, nobody can be held to account for such incidents, yet the local community has to pick up the bill. That is where we are heading: a vicious cycle of communities being so resentful about these encampments.

We are asking for the same laws to apply to everyone and to see something coming out of this consultation that results in genuine action to ensure that people are held to account, in the same way that I would expect all my other constituents to be held to account for the kinds of incidents that we have heard about today.

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