

JACKIE DOYLE-PRICE MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

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Dear Mr Gedhul

I asked the Local Government Ombudsman to investigate the issues at Buckles Lane. The report which was released in March is attached. It upholds my complaint. I chose not to make this public at the time as we were all in the throes of dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic. However, the report raises important issues which need to be addressed.

The history of Buckles Lane is known to us all. It is a tolerated site for use by the showpeople. It has grown substantially over the last decade and is no longer occupied just by travelling showpeople. Indeed, mobile homes are openly advertised for rent and yield approximately £600 per month. There are apparently now 460 households there and the site is three times the size that it should be. It is of course a greenbelt site and should therefore be properly protected by the planning authority.

The failure to regularise Buckles Lane and enforce against planning breaches is one that has been neglected by successive council administrations of all colours. It is a big challenge and very difficult but that is no excuse for inaction. Indeed, it is the very fact that there has been inaction that has allowed it to grow. Those that put new homes on the site know that they will go unchallenged. So, they continue to do so. This is extremely unfair to the majority of residents across Thurrock who do abide by the law. It is time now that the Council gripped this issue. It will probably need the involvement of other agencies such as HMRC, Immigration Enforcement and of course the Police.

In addition to the planning breaches it is clear that the settlement has become dangerous. There are inadequate utilities leading to regular power cuts. The dwellings are far too close together leaving risk of fire. Essex fire has a special plan to deal with inadequate water supply in the event of fire.

I have raised these issues regularly in the ten years since I became Member of Parliament. On each occasion I was fobbed off. Ultimately if elected councillors are not prepared to give challenge then my voice is no more powerful than anyone else when it comes to holding the Council to account. It has been incredibly frustrating to see the representations I have made on behalf of constituents to see them simply fobbed off.

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR THURROCK

Telephone: 020 7219 7171 Facsimile: 020 7219 4924 Email: jackie.doyleprice.mp@parliament.uk

I was therefore somewhat encouraged to receive a response from the Chief Executive in March 2017, which indicated that the current situation was not satisfactory. However, by August 2019, nothing had happened. This prompted Cllr Jefferies to table a motion in Council to properly debate the issue. Disappointingly this elicited a less than open response from the Council, so I referred the matter to the Local Government Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman's report is attached. The inquiry is restricted inquiry only to events from March 2017. The inquiry records that work was done by the Council to establish the scale of the problem and the ownership of the land which led to a report in September 2018. The report highlights a number of specific issues:

- A. There are approximately 460 households, many of which are single males in employment. There would therefore be no obligation on the Council to find them alternative housing if enforcement action were taken to remove the dwellings that should not be there.
- B. Many of the people there are not showpeople and there is evidence that showpeople are subletting their plots.
- C. Officers found evidence of fire risk but felt they could not take action due to lack of planning consent.
- D. Officers found inadequate water; sewerage and electricity
- E. Officers further found poor living conditions on some plots with poor health and education outcomes.

The report concluded that the Council could enforce and could levy council tax. It seems most remiss that the Council has not levied council tax. Indeed, it seems to me that backdated council tax demands could be a useful tool to encourage tenants to move on. I know that you have suggested the properties could be taxed in the past.

The report further concluded that the Council should work with the Showman's guild to develop a planning application. I know that some of the Showmen would like to see their settlements regularised. The Ombudsman notes that it was suggested that a planning application could be brought forward within six months but that this did not happen.

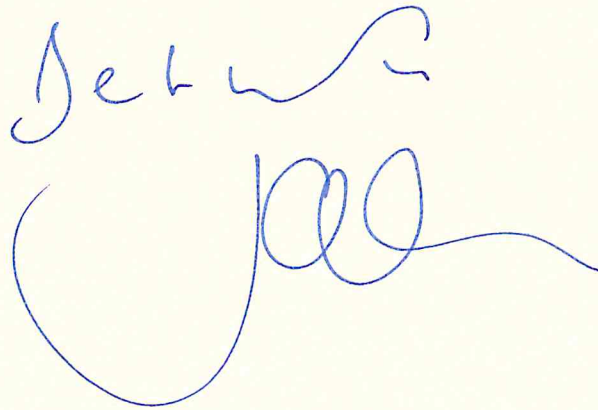
The inquiry then finds a further meeting in September 2019 which considered a report which was a recast of the report considered in 2018. The issues had not moved on in the intervening year. I can only conclude that the meeting was convened in response to Cllr Jefferies motion. I understand that there is now a lead officer and I hope that progress can be made with dealing with this ongoing serious issue. Can I ask that you ensure that the Council machine supports this effort properly. I don't underestimate the scale of the problem. As I say I do think it needs a multi-agency approach and I am of course ready to ask for any additional help that might be needed.

In upholding my complaint, the Ombudsman found that the Council made good progress from March 2017 until Sept 2018. It had appointed consultants. It had developed a good understanding of the site and Officers had considered a report and made decisions. The Ombudsman also concludes that the Council has only focused on area 1 which has a single landowner. The site is much bigger and the Council needs to develop a strategy for the rest of the site. It also

concludes that the Council working group only began to meet in October 2019. The overall conclusion is therefore that the Council failed to take appropriate steps to address the issues at Buckles Lane after September 2018

More generally though I think it is yet another example of the Council's inability to deliver significant projects. It is now four years since I said I had no confidence in PCRL to deliver the regeneration of Purfleet. It is barely any further forward since then and I have had to intervene to get the objections of statutory consultees withdrawn. In 2017 the Government awarded £10m for the regeneration of Grays Railway station. The lack of progress means we are at risk of losing that cash. Taken together these indicate a failure to ensure that projects are being managed by staff with the right skills and the authority to get things done. If Thurrock is ever going to be deliver on its ambitious agenda this needs to be addressed.

The people of Thurrock are becoming very cynical about the promises made to them by their political leaders and given these examples who can blame them. None of us want to be embarrassed by failure to deliver what we have promised. Now that you have the advantage of a majority administration, the time has arrived to give the appropriate challenge to ensure that the internal management of the Council is capable of delivering its obligations and its promises. I am releasing these documents to the Press



Cc Lyn Carpenter, Chief Executive Thurrock Borough Council

Cllr Robert Gledhill
Thurrock Council
Civic Offices
New Road
Grays

RM17 6SL