



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Mrs Sharon Groth  
Clerk, Witney Town Council  
Town Hall  
Market Square  
Witney  
Oxon OX28 6AG

Wednesday, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2021  
Ref: aw/RC35547

Dear Sharon,

Thank you for your letter on behalf of Witney Town Council. You raise the very serious issue of organised crime, drug dealing and county lines operations.

We must break the deadly cycle of violence that devastates the lives of individuals, families, and communities. This is why I welcome the Government's Serious Violence Strategy, which sets out its response to recent concerning increases in serious and organised crime. It outlines an ambitious programme working with a range of Government Departments and partnerships across a number of sectors such as education, health, social services, housing, youth services, and victim services.

The Strategy marks a major shift in the Government's response to these crimes. It strikes a balance between prevention and robust law enforcement. The strategy identifies the changing drugs market, in particular the devastating impact of crack cocaine as a key driver of the violence harming communities. The Strategy also announces a range of powerful actions to tackle the issue of 'county lines' and its implications for drugs, violence and exploitation of vulnerable people. As the Town Council is aware, county lines gangs are exploiting vulnerable individuals including many children and have a devastating impact on our communities. As your letter notes, this is not just an urban issue, but one that affects rural communities like our own too.

It is good news that the Government is investing £25 million to tackle county lines. You may be interested to hear that a recent drive in police action in September last year resulted in over 1,000 arrests, drugs worth more than £1m seized and over 1,500 vulnerable individuals safeguarded.

The strategy is not solely focused on law enforcement, but also depends on partnerships across a number of sectors. Early intervention can help catch young people before they go down the wrong path, encouraging them to make positive choices. The youth endowment fund and their National Centre of Excellence are both extremely welcome. The fund supports those young people most at risk of serious violence. By tackling the root causes of the problem, while also getting the most dangerous criminals off our streets, we will undoubtedly decrease the number of vulnerable children who fall into or are forced into county lines by criminals who would exploit them.

This strategy represents a step change in the way Government responds, and I welcome the focus on early intervention and prevention to help steer young people away from crime in the first place, while putting in place measures to tackle the root causes of the problem. I am also pleased that the Government is recruiting 20,000 additional police officers and providing the most substantial increase in police funding in ten years. You will be pleased to know that

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Thames Valley Police has already been bolstered by 260 new officers in the last year alone.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me about this crucially important issue. I can assure you and the Town Council that I will continue to follow this issue closely.

Yours,

**Robert Courts MP**