

A Year in Community Safety and Enforcement at the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham

I am in my third term as a Village Ward councillor and was asked in May 2019 by Darren Rodwell, the Leader of the Council, if I would like to be the Cabinet member for Community safety for LBBD. As I felt that having a voice on the Executive was the right way forward for Dagenham, I happily accepted the post. So, a year on - how's it going?

Crime was my number one priority. Sadly serious crime in the local area has increased and we have lost some young people to serious violence, which has created wounds in our community that will take a long time to heal. The backdrop to these increases in crime is well known - 20,000 police officers laid off since 2010 across the country, and the Borough Command Unit which we are members of, along Havering and Redbridge, has lost 1000 officers since 2010. This has been coupled with the decimation of youth services. These cuts are a result of a Government determined to enforce their dogmatic ideology of austerity onto communities such as our own.

My first action in response to these challenges was to hold a Serious Crime Summit. I knew that I didn't want a talking shop but a group capable of effecting real change. We needed to hear from everyone involved with serious crime, and I was incredibly pleased with the turnout. The summit was held at Dagenham East and the room was packed. The Guest Speakers were inspiring and had answers that allowed us to rise above the narrative of bewilderment and fear that has defined this rise in serious crime. I'm pleased to say that some of these speakers have since been contacted by the Borough to help find a way forward.

Darren Rodwell, as council leader, already had a plan using the resources we had to target the Borough with the introduction of a new police station and reporting stations which, we are currently still working on. The town centres are a huge concern to the public with residents, visitors and people that work in the Borough all being effected by the state of our streets. As with anything in life it sometimes comes down to knowing the right people, so I started meeting with a senior policeman in the borough to discuss the problems and potential solutions over butty and tea. I like to think that this built a working relationship between us and I would like to promote more collaboration going forward, as we share common goals and are stronger when working together.

There's some more good news - within a year, Barking Town centre will get nine police officers as opposed to the current two, which can't fail to have a significant impact on local crime. Those officers will also visit the Heathway area - again, an area which is of huge public concern. I am by no means saying we have "cracked it", but I am a strong

believer if we don't deal with the low level anti-social behaviour it opens communities up for more serious crime to prosper.

Local authorities are able to buy police to concentrate on their priorities, and it used to be that if you bought one police officer you would get another for free. This policy has ended and this, combined with budget cuts, makes it near impossible to ensure adequate policing numbers unless you are part of a very wealthy borough. We have also been further impacted by a decrease in resources from the SEC 92 met patrol agreement. However, we are tightening up our enforcement team, increasing their numbers, and jointly tasking them with our former police estates team, which is now called the Police and enforcement task force. This combined force receive their objectives every Monday from the council, allowing us to be flexible and reactive in what we prioritise on a weekly basis.

This enforcement is a big part of what we do, The Borough has always enforced with great rigour, and I like to think that since I arrived no one can be in any doubt of what we achieve. The Communication piece to residents, visitors and businesses is vital. The Wall of Shame, which shows residents fly tipping on camera, regularly has thousands of views, and importantly the public do ring in if they recognise anyone. The Borough successfully prosecuted against B & M, who sold a knife to an underage youth. We enforced a record breaking fine, and national news outlets ran the story. Thanks to these efforts, the cry of "why don't the council do anything?" is diminishing.

The Licensed Landlord scheme is something the Borough is rightly proud of. It is the Borough saying that we will no longer accept exploitative landlords mistreating people who rent in the Borough. The scheme has recently been renewed and we are one of the few Boroughs with a Borough wide Landlord Licensing scheme. Essentially, it means that if you want to be a Landlord in B & D you will need to pay a fee. This enables us to keep track of and have enforcement staff deal with the rogue landlords. I have been out on a site visit, and working for the MP I am aware of the appalling conditions some people have been forced to live in. It reminds me of times that should be long past, and it must not be allowed to continue.

Back to the police. As the Cabinet member for Community safety and enforcement I receive the police response times for emergency calls. Since the merging of Borough police into the Basic Crime Units the response times have worsened, with an initial total collapse of times that has improved. Having said this, I have written to Sophie Linden, deputy Mayor, on two occasions highlighting poor response times in B & D which were worse than those seen in Redbridge and Havering.

Having worked closer with the police I can see what a difficult job they have, but I feel that some senior police staff can have an attitude of "why we should answer to politicians?" This can be seen out overtly and in more subtle ways. In my own opinion,

until there is a truly independent police complaints procedure like in the United States, problems with the police can lose the “buy in” of a community. A bit like MP’s, they have IPSA overseeing them. It may feel uncomfortable at times but is a vital check on their actions.

I said at the crime summit there is a real sense of bewilderment in many communities as to what is happening regarding the rise in serious crime? School heads have told me what they must deal with regarding adverse childhood experiences, which are on the rise. They have a huge role to play with parents and guardians in dealing with crime. I know now that many groups in the borough are calling into the schools to highlight gang issues, and what county lines mean for gang activity. However I personally feel that there is an underrepresentation of the extent of problems in some schools. This seems to stem from our competitive schooling system and schools downplaying the issue so they’re not seen as “problem schools”.

Even if we could reverse all the police cuts we can’t “police our way out of crime”. What about prison sentences? I feel that they are not tough enough. The CPS has a difficult job to do, but many families are shocked when their family member is a victim of serious crime to find out that the alleged perpetrators are on bail. As if that isn’t galling enough, when they come to court the sentence is much less than seems proportionate and they are left with a feeling that justice has not been served.

B & D also has one of the worst records for domestic violence, and we have launched a domestic violence commission to look at this. Underlying all the problems is poverty. The drug dealers wouldn’t be able to appeal to the children in the Borough if they felt like they had hope for a brighter future and support from their community. There is a cohort of children who turn to crime who, I believe, would have left school and gone into Fords or an apprenticeship just 20-30 years ago. They don’t like academia, and the drive for all children to go to University is unrealistic for some of the children in the Borough, even with student loans, since the end to maintenance grants.

So, what’s my conclusion? Some good things have been done, but there is so much left to do. The Schools, the Borough, probation services and the YOS all do outstanding work in the face of serious adversity, and I know that we will keep striving for what is best for our children and our community.

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