



# Dr Alasdair Pinkerton

Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Spokesman for Surrey Heath  
Email: [alsadairpinkerton4surreyheath@gmail.com](mailto:alsadairpinkerton4surreyheath@gmail.com)

Rt Hon. Michael Gove MP  
c/o Surrey Heath Conservative Association Office  
Curzon House  
Church Rd  
Windlesham  
GU20 6BH

26th April 2020

Dear Michael,

I am writing this open letter to you in my capacity as the Parliamentary Spokesperson for the Surrey Heath Liberal Democrats. Four months have now passed since the Surrey Heath electorate were asked to choose between us. As you know I stood on a platform to break the Conservative “triple lock” (MP, County Council & Borough Council) that has persisted in Surrey Heath for at least forty years, in order to ensure more transparent local governance and greater levels of political and financial accountability in the decisions that shape our lives here.

It is with sadness and personal disappointment that I feel compelled to write to you now about a number of issues presently impacting upon our local community that cast a particularly harsh light on lapses, misjudgements and failures of governance and political accountability.

### *Lightwater Traveller Incursion*

On 21st April a large group of travellers occupied the Recreation Ground field behind All Saints Church in Lightwater. This field is an essential amenity for local residents of Lightwater, particularly so at the current time as residents seek to use this space for their permitted Covid-19 lockdown exercise.

In terms of the removal of the illegal encampment, it is my understanding that the Conservative-led Windlesham Parish Council has been left alone to pursue civil proceedings against the travellers. Surrey Heath Borough Council and Surrey Police, meanwhile, have chosen to interpret the recent Covid-19 ‘treatment of travellers’ guidance from Stephen Greenhalgh MP in a different way to many other English councils and police forces.

The truth is that the traveller community has been hefted to the land of Surrey Heath for centuries, albeit in ways that we, as private land or home owners, might not recognise as legitimate. As vast residential development has taken place over recent decades, the space for the traveller community to occupy temporarily has become more and more limited, and this has only been compounded by Surrey County Council’s failure to create any traveller transit sites. There have been numerous warnings about precisely this kind of scenario unfolding, including, very publicly, by Nick Ephgrave, the then Chief Constable of Surrey Police, who gave a stark assessment of Surrey’s vulnerability to illegal traveller encampments in August 2018. The residents of Lightwater are, today, paying a high price for the failure of Conservative-dominated Surrey County Council to act appropriately.

Central to this is the issue of policing which, like many other services, has been cut back to the bone. During the General Election I spoke with various members of the police who told me how stretched they were and how that was fundamentally affecting their ability to meet the needs and expectations of the community. The most concerning aspect of those conversations was how resigned the police had become to the situation. They saw no hope of reprieve and sounded defeated by the inevitability of still further cuts. Years of cuts and underfunding can have this kind of deleterious effect, even on the most dedicated of our public servants.

Perhaps this helps to explain why, over the past few days, I have received numerous messages from Lightwater residents who have experienced violent, intimidatory and anti-social behaviour, as well as breaches of social distancing guidelines, by the traveller community, while the police force appears powerless to act.

### *SHBC Chief Executive Pay Report*

With the recent publication of the Browne Jacobson independent report into the unlawful payments made to SHBC CEO, Karen Whelan, and the subsequent BBC coverage, I was encouraged to see you make a public statement on the matter.

I am disappointed, however, that neither your statement (of 17 April) nor subsequent statements from the Surrey Heath Conservatives, acknowledge any institutional failures (nor lessons to be learned) on the part of the Surrey Heath Conservative group, choosing instead to deflect all blame onto two individuals—Moira Gibson and Cllr Richard Brooks—while, apparently, forgetting that both these individuals were Conservative councillors and senior members of the exclusively Conservative-composed Surrey Heath Borough Council Executive throughout the period under investigation. This stretches all credibility.

The Browne Jacobson report makes clear that the Conservative group in SHBC knew about the requested pay rise, discussed it and came to a view, but failed to refer the issue to the full Council for a decision. That failure is suggestive of one of two possibilities; either incompetence (by failing to follow the lawful process) or deliberate collusion. Whichever it is, the residents of Surrey Heath now require reassurance that all Conservative councillors that were either directly involved in the process, or through lack of understanding or interest failed to spot the wrongdoing, be investigated and disciplined where wrongdoing is found.

You may have seen that a resident-led petition for the unredacted CEO pay report to be formally submitted to the Police for investigation has been launched and can be found here: <https://www.change.org/p/surrey-heath-borough-council-pass-the-unredacted-ceo-pay-report-to-the-police>

I do hope you will join me in signing this petition so we can understand exactly what has happened in order to ensure that governance is improved and that this can never happen again. Most importantly, we should ensure that criminal proceedings are brought if sufficient evidence is found.

### *Councillor conduct*

We all know that these are stressful and difficult times and that extended social isolation can lead to flashes of intemperance in online communications. It is, however, critical that our elected representatives remain professional and respectful in their communication with residents.

It has been brought to my attention that the conduct of one particular Conservative Borough and County Councillor has fallen short of these standards in several recent instances and has caused upset and consternation in the community. Clearly the Borough and County Council's Conduct Committees may wish to take their own action in due course, but in the meantime it is critical that residents of Surrey Heath can have confidence in the professionalism of their locally elected representatives.

It may be an opportune moment for the Surrey Heath Conservative Association to remind councillors of these core values, and to issue an apology to those affected by these slippages of language and professional conduct.

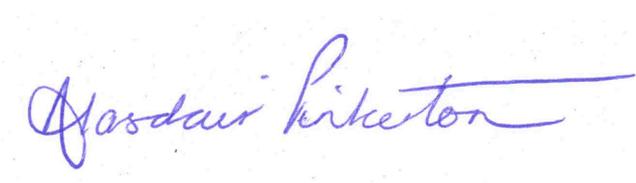
### *Next Steps*

I know that you are very busy with the national picture right now and that has probably meant you have been less able to focus on local matters. Additionally, the lockdown measures will no doubt have impacted your ability to travel down to Surrey Heath.

For these reasons I felt compelled to make you aware, on behalf of residents, of these critical issues affecting us all locally.

I look forward to receiving your response to these matters.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alasdair Pinkerton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Alasdair Pinkerton, Ph.D.