Dear Mike,

Many thanks for your detailed response to my letter to the Home Secretary following the Summit that I hosted in June to discuss the effectiveness or otherwise of current UK drug policies. I apologise for the length of time that it has taken for me to respond to your letter but I wanted to take the opportunity to consult with the eminent experts that made presentations at my Summit.

As you may well expect they have raised many issues with your response, specifically in regard to the impact of drug related crime on society and the lack of suggestion of how that could be diminished by looking at innovative solutions used in other countries; the lack of mention of the impact in Portugal of decriminalisation; the measures announced this week by Aodhán Ó Riordáin the chief of Ireland’s National Drugs Strategy; and the comparative harm to users and others of different drug types (Ecstasy class A as is Heroin and Cocaine).

There was concern that your response talks of drug policy working because drug use is falling, without taking account that an effective drug policy needs to be measured across a number of metrics including death and crime rates. In terms of death rates – there has been a 64% increase in heroin and morphine related deaths in the last 2 years and it is at its highest rate since records began in 1996. In relation to crime rates your own recent consultation document on Police Funding recognised drugs as a key driver of crime with heroin and cocaine addiction responsible for 43% of acquisitive crime.
I could mention many other rational concerns that have been raised with your letter but I am in danger of rehearsing the arguments that would be the domain of a review or Commission that my Summit requested. I am not an expert in this field and that is why I invited specialists to present to the audience of over 100 professionals working in this area who attended the June Summit.

Like you I am an elected representative; I was elected to represent the population of over 1 million people in Derbyshire in regard to keeping our communities safe and free from harm and criminality. Your figures stating the amount of drug related crime linked to Serious Organised Crime Groups would certainly align to the data available in Derbyshire and in the East Midlands region. Quite frankly they are shocking. What is more shocking is that the law enforcement employed to address this problem, whilst exemplary as a professional policing operation, is tremendously expensive whilst being totally ineffective in its objective of removing drugs from the streets of our communities.

I cite the Derbyshire Operation which culminated in December 2013 resulting in 45 criminals being arrested, most handed custodial sentences and two public houses in Chesterfield town centre closed down with the co-operation of the local licensing authority three days before Christmas. The Operation took around a year to bring to fruition; a brilliant piece of policing with partnership agencies. Has it had the desired outcome of improving life for local people and removed drugs from the streets of Chesterfield and Buxton? Not at all.

In a more recent operation a Heroin user arrested was asked how long it would be before a supply was available on the streets; answer, probably 2 hours, 4 hours maximum! Mick Creedon, Derbyshire Chief Constable, has described this as being like the Hydra, you cut off one head and two more grow back. This is what is happening in reality on our streets.

When I say the 'war on drugs isn’t working' this is what I allude to. I also allude to vulnerable individuals being groomed by criminal drug dealers into purchasing their dangerous products on the streets; no control, no proof of age check, no cognisance of health impact, no check on product quality. A quick criminal deal and hang the consequences. The grooming process develops into using and abusing these vulnerable individuals into becoming the organised criminals’ street dealers, who are always expendable.

David Cameron

I understand that grasping the policy agenda around drugs use is, and always has been, a tremendously difficult issue for any Government Minister to grasp. However I am confident that you are aware of David Cameron’s speech in Parliament on 5 December 2002 in a debate about Government Drugs Policy. I reproduce some extracts from Hansard that I see as crucial points made by our now Prime Minister;

http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/2002/dec/05/government-drugs-policy

Mr. Cameron

I had to think long and hard about the problem when I served on the Select Committee. Does my hon. Friend accept that the signals argument goes both ways? What signal does it send to young people that ecstasy is in the same class as heroin and cocaine?

If you would like to receive email information from the Commissioner such as the newsletter and information about events and consultations, please contact us and ask to be added to the Community Consultation Panel list. You can also sign up on our website at www.derbyshire-pcc.gov.uk
I would like to talk about two of the report’s most contentious recommendations. The first involves the prescribing of heroin—diamorphine—and the second relates to the use of safe injecting rooms. Both those recommendations have the same end in mind, which is to get people into treatment and to make that happen quickly. We have to realise that every day that an addict spends out on the streets funding their habit is a time of crime, of ill health and, possibly, of death. Many people estimate the percentage of property crime committed by drug abusers to be nearer 50 per cent. than 30 per cent., which would mean that every other time someone’s house was burgled or their car broken into, it would be drug-related. This provision will be of interest to all our constituents, if we can get it right.

Why prescribe heroin? It has worked overseas; the evidence that the Committee heard on that was compelling. The average age of heroin addicts in this country is, tragically, still going down. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey mentioned that in other countries, such as Holland, it is going up. Furthermore, methadone is not suitable for everyone. Some very chaotic drug users need to be stabilised, and perhaps heroin is the answer for them. The proposal might also help to cut the number of drug-related deaths. The fact that 3,500 people died last year from drug overdoses shames us. Most importantly, whatever treatment is chosen—including heroin prescribing for the hardest cases—at least the people concerned are getting into treatment and making contact with the agencies and the people who can help them. This is a difficult decision for the Government, but I hope that they will make it and persevere with it, because I believe that it is the right one.

I hope that the Government will be brave. We are seeing some progress, although they are, I am afraid, sometimes fond of using tough language on subjects such as crime and asylum. This is not a time for tough language; they must just get it right. The Home Secretary called for an adult debate and I welcome that, but I did not welcome his response to the report, as he immediately ruled out one or two recommendations. We had spent hours thinking, debating, arguing and considering the evidence, but he seemed to dismiss those recommendations in a matter of minutes. Rather than rejecting them so hastily, it would have been better to spend time reflecting on them.

Let me end with a plea to the Minister. This is an incredibly difficult subject. It is impossible to control from Whitehall the number of drugs that will be taken, what new drugs will appear and what will happen to the figures. If the figures do not do the right thing, I ask the Government not to return to retribution and war on drugs. That has been tried, and we all know that it does not work.

I think we are making progress. Of course, anyone who takes part in a debate like this is in danger of being called soft. Following the report’s publication I was introduced in this way by a local radio station: “Now we will hear from a Conservative MP who thinks that heroin addicts should be given prescriptions for ecstasy”. That was a tough one; it was difficult for me to explain my way out of it.

I think, though, that if we get this right we will have a chance to cut crime, save money, improve the health of the country and even save lives. That is definitely worth a brickbat or two.
Public Opinion

It would also appear that public opinion is moving towards a comprehensive review of UK Drug Policy. In the summer during the kerfuffle around whether Police Forces would treat the discreet use of cannabis in private homes as a priority many national papers ran stories on this. The Daily Mail, often thought of as the barometer of 'middle England' opinion ran a negative piece on PCCs and Forces who were not seeing this as one of their top priorities. Interestingly the public comments attached to the article were overwhelmingly in support of the realistic position of those Forces and a great many called for a review of policy.


I believe you would have public support and the support of professionals working in this area like the 100 plus who attended my Drug Summit in June. Let me re-iterate; the Summit was not calling for any specific outcome such as legalisation or decriminalisation, it was calling solely for an expert led comprehensive review of policy that looks at all areas of drug policy including those adopted around the world. Or as David Cameron said on 5 December 2002 'The Home Secretary called for an adult debate and I welcome that', and I, like the Prime Minister would welcome an adult debate on this.

In conclusion I ask that you reconsider your decision not to commission a comprehensive review of UK Drugs Policy and support the Prime Minister who came across as passionate in the 2002 debate in his belief that retribution and the war on drugs is not working, yet we continue to follow exactly that policy to this day.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Alan Charles
Police & Crime Commissioner, Derbyshire

CC   Rt Hon Theresa May, Home Secretary
     Chief Constable Mick Creedon

Delegates at my June summit asked that I keep them informed of correspondence with Home Office Ministers and accordingly I will post both this letter and your earlier response on my website.