

Marie Goldman

MP for Chelmsford

Why we should be wary of anything which weakens policing by consent

REFORM-LED Essex County Council has brought forward a proposal to hand over £150,000 of taxpayers' money to a private security firm, instead of backing our hard-working yet under-resourced Essex Police. Let me be clear: this would be the wrong decision.

Essex County Council's own paper (FP-160-08-26 ED) admits that: "Security staff will have no more powers to take any action than a member of the public. Any need for law enforcement will need to be led by Essex Police."

So, not only will this awful gimmick be costly, it also won't have the power to achieve its goal of public protection.

Let me also be clear: when the public need reassurance, it should be provided. That's why I had already asked our local police, at the start of the summer, to increase patrols in Chelmsford city centre.

It's why I had visited local businesses with the Chelmsford District Commander to find out firsthand from them if they were experiencing any serious issues. They weren't, by the way – so much of what is reported online is greatly exaggerated or simply made up. We must be so careful not to be taken in by those who seem not to be motivated by the truth, only by what they want others to believe.

But regardless, I understand that many members of the public feel the need for further reassurance. I'm glad that Liberal Democrat-led Chelmsford City Council and Essex Police have been jointly funding extra high-visibility evening patrols in the city centre and local green spaces through July, August, and September 2026. This is the right way to do it. Unaccountable, private security firms is not.

At the heart of British policing is a principle that has endured since Sir Robert Peel set out his vision in the 19th century: policing by consent.

It's the idea that the legitimacy of the police comes not from force or fear, but from the public's approval and cooperation. Officers are citizens in uniform, accountable to the law and to the communities they



Marie Goldman MP with Essex Police patrols in Chelmsford city centre this summer
MARIE GOLDMAN MP

serve. Their authority is collective, not commercial. A private security firm, however professional its staff may be, simply does not operate on that basis.

When public funds are used to pay for private patrols, several problems follow. The first is accountability.

Police officers are bound by strict codes of conduct, independent oversight bodies, and democratic scrutiny.

Their powers – and their limits – are clear.

Private security staff operate under contract. Their accountability runs upwards to a company director, not outwards to the public. If something goes wrong, the route to redress is murkier, slower, and far less transparent.

Then there's the question of powers. Private guards do not have the legal authority of constables. They cannot arrest in the same way, they cannot use force in the same way,

and they cannot investigate crime.

Yet when they are placed in uniforms that resemble police attire and asked to "patrol" streets, the public understandably assumes they carry the same responsibilities.

That blurring of roles is dangerous. It creates confusion, weakens trust and risks situations escalating because expectations and powers do not match.

There is also a fairness issue. Policing is a public service, funded collectively so that every community – affluent or not – receives protection. When councils or business groups start paying private firms to fill gaps left by overstretched police forces, we drift towards a two-tier system: those who can afford extra patrols get them, and those who cannot are left behind.

That is not how safety should work. And let's also be clear, when it comes to crime and areas that could do with more funding to tackle it, there are plenty of deprived areas across Essex, including in Chelmsford, where £150,000 could do a lot of good, and yet there's no mention of them by Essex County Council.

Why not? Not headline-grabbing enough?

But perhaps the most corrosive consequence is what it signals about the state of policing itself. If public bodies feel compelled to hire private firms to do what the police should be resourced to do, it suggests a system under strain. Residents see fewer officers, slower response times and rising frustration – and instead of fixing the root causes, we risk normalising a workaround. A workaround that chips away at the very consent policing relies on.

Chelmsford's communities deserve visible, trusted, properly-funded neighbourhood policing, not a patchwork of private patrols. The answer to stretched police forces is investment, not outsourcing. The answer to public concern is accountability, not contractual ambiguity.

Policing by consent is one of the quiet strengths of British democracy. We should be wary of anything that weakens it, especially when it's paid for with public money.

I have championed Essex Police in Parliament and I will continue to do so. Our hardworking officers deserve

more support. I can't help but think this proposed scheme from Essex County Council will just make their jobs harder.

Parliament has now returned for a short while after the summer recess. It will rise again for conference recess on September 15. It will be very interesting to see how different things may be under our new Prime Minister. We've already seen a markedly different style in communications over the summer – let's see how things progress as we get down to the tricky business of actually running the country.

And finally, I'd like to say a huge thank you to John Palfrey who has been editing the Essex Chronicle for probably more years than he cares to admit, and a journalist for even longer. John is leaving for pastures new and I want to thank him for his impartial help and encouragement over the past few years since I first started writing these columns. I wish him the very best in whatever comes next for him. I know he will be missed in local journalism.

Thanks, as always, for reading.

Marie

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