

## An MP's surgery

MPs are receiving copies of a lobby email asking us to sign a pledge not to report illegal migrants if they come to our surgeries. Let me explain the nature of an MP's surgery and the legal position to those who send in this email.

The main purposes of an MP's surgery are to take up cases for constituents where government has let them down, treated them badly or failed to apply its own rules fairly, and to listen to constituents who have advice on how laws and government policies should be changed to make life better. Constituents often stray beyond their relations with national government into their relations with Councils and sometimes even their contractual relations with private sector suppliers and employers. The MP has most chance of helping with national government, where more direct access to Ministers can sometimes trigger a review of an action or policy which resolves the problem, or where legal change can sometimes be generated to fix the problem for the future. I work with local Councillors on local matters, as the Councillors have privileged access to local officers that the MP does not have. Just as collectively MPs can change offending national laws, so Councillors collectively can change offending local policies. Occasionally an MP letter to a private sector company that is misbehaving can help, but as a general rule contractual disputes between constituents and private companies are best worked out in direct dialogue with the company and through the usual complaints processes available.

Attending an MP's surgery does not give the constituent sanctuary from the law. Whilst an MP will handle information carefully, in order to process a complaint or resolve a problem with government the MP will usually have to share the information with the government. I wish to repeat that if someone comes to my surgery they should understand I have no special privilege to give them to protect them from the law, and will normally share their information with the authorities to seek to resolve their issue. If someone is living in Wokingham as an illegal migrant and they wish to seek legal permission to stay then I will assist them if they have a sensible case by contacting the authorities, but I cannot give them some indemnity or help them cover up their illegal status. Similarly if someone comes to me and tells me they have not paid tax I am happy to take up their case with the authorities if they believe they do not have to pay the tax or if they think their assessment is wrong, but I am not in the business of condoning tax evasion and have no blessings to give to tax law breakers.

Quite often an MP has to explain to a constituent that the law is as it is for a good reason, and they like everyone else will just have to accept it even though they do not like it. Sometimes I find advising someone not to pursue a complaint but to accept the world as it is can prove to be good advice which they accept. You can cause yourself a lot of trouble and distress by pursuing complaints that are not going to result in a good outcome. Show me a just cause and a clear unfairness from government and I will fight tenaciously to have the injustice remedied.