

## Bournemouth MPs Warn Against Unregulated Vigilante Patrols

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Senior figures in Bournemouth have voiced strong concerns about self-appointed groups patrolling streets without official regulation, warning that such actions could risk public safety.

Bournemouth's Labour MP Jessica Toale cautioned against the dangers of allowing unregulated vigilantes to assume security roles, stressing that law enforcement must

remain the responsibility of trained, authorised personnel.

“It is not the job of a self-appointed, unregulated group—with a range of experience levels and different motivations—to take it upon themselves to don a makeshift uniform and patrol our streets,” Ms Toale said. “There is a real danger of abuse of artificial power here, and it is confusing for residents and visitors.”

The warning comes amid the rise of Safeguard Force, a volunteer organisation founded by Gary Bartlett and now comprising more than 200 members. The group states its mission is to “protect the most vulnerable people in our town, especially women, children, and the elderly.”

However, Dorset Police has made it clear that the Force does not endorse Safeguard Force.

Ms Toale acknowledged that communities have a role in maintaining safety, but urged residents to contribute through recognised and regulated roles.

“While it’s good to see lots of individuals willing to take action, this effort should be directed to established roles where the relevant checks, training and support can be given roles such as PCSOs, the BID’s town rangers, or beachfront security guards,” she explained.

She added that concerns about crime and antisocial behaviour have been repeatedly raised in Parliament, resulting in additional funding and powers for Dorset Police.

Dorset Police and Crime Commissioner David Sidwick stressed that any public safety group must meet strict standards.

“I am aware Dorset Police is currently liaising with this group regarding several important matters, as well as working closely with partners as part of a review into this group and their proposed activities,” he said.

Mr Sidwick emphasised that proper vetting, safeguarding, and training are essential for any community-based security work.

“Day in and day out, professionally trained Dorset Police officers, staff, and volunteers work tirelessly in challenging circumstances to keep people safe, prevent crime, and bring perpetrators to justice,” he added.

The Commissioner expressed support for community-led initiatives that operate in partnership with law enforcement, such as Neighbourhood Watch, Community Speed Watch, and street pastor programmes.

Bournemouth East MP Tom Hayes highlighted that increased policing, rather than independent patrol groups, was the solution to safety concerns.

“The answer is more policing,” Mr Hayes said. “Because you told me your concerns, 40 extra officers are coming. I need to know your concerns so I can help direct these officers to where they’re needed most.”

Mr Hayes urged residents to keep engaging with their MPs and police representatives to ensure resources are deployed effectively.

The emergence of the Safeguard Force has sparked wider discussions about the role of citizens in community safety. Supporters argue that visible patrols deter antisocial behaviour, while critics warn that a lack of oversight could lead to misconduct, misunderstandings, or harm to both patrol members and the public.

In the UK, citizen involvement in public safety traditionally operates through vetted and supervised schemes. These include:

Neighbourhood Watch: Encourages residents to report suspicious activity to police.

Community Speed Watch: Trains volunteers to monitor traffic speeds and improve road safety.

Street Pastors: Volunteers who patrol nightlife areas, offering assistance and preventing conflict.

All of these operate under official guidelines, maintaining close coordination with police forces.

Dorset Police has reiterated that members of the public should report crimes or suspicious behaviour through official channels rather than taking matters into their own hands.

A spokesperson noted that public safety depends on accountability, training, and legal authority elements, which are absent in unregulated patrol groups.

The Force continues to investigate the activities of Safeguard Force while reviewing its operational proposals.

As the review progresses, local leaders hope to channel public enthusiasm for safety into regulated, well-supported initiatives, ensuring that the drive to protect the community does not compromise the standards and accountability required for policing.