

ACRA

Alliance of Christchurch Residents Associations
Representing over 10,000 local residents
www.wcresidents.co.uk

Christopher Chope OBE MP
House of Commons
Westminster
LONDON, SW1 0AA

24th January 2016. By e-mail

Dear Chris

You are aware that ACRA represents the Residents Associations of Christchurch. Ever since the proposed merger of Christchurch with Bournemouth, East Dorset and Poole was announced we have been pursuing three objectives: first to understand what is happening and the implications for residents; second to communicate that to residents; third to lobby for consultation with the people of Christchurch before any proposed change is implemented.

We were heartened by two quotations from you:

Sharing services is, however, a very different proposition from changing local government structures. Greg Clark has made it clear that if there is to be any such change, it must be bottom up rather than top down and must come from the people and their elected representatives and not from the Government. You will be pleased to know that he confirmed to me in the House of Commons on Monday that the Government will not impose change on councils against their will.

And:

If any change is proposed, it should not be implemented unless or until it is approved by the people of Christchurch. I say this, not least, because none of this agenda was discussed with the public either prior to the District Council elections or the General Election. The Conservative Party manifesto referred only to the possibility of devolving 'far reaching powers over economic development, transport and social care to large cities which choose to have elected mayors'.

Latterly, however, we have been puzzled by two events.

First, the financial pressure exerted by Central Government was racked up several notches. In November the Government published its Spending Review and Autumn Statement, indicating that the withdrawal of Rate Support Grant would be phased over four years, leaving all councils mainly funded by just council tax and business rates. Dorset CC for example made a planning assumption that it would lose 30% of the grant over each of the next three years, and the remainder in year four.

However, the provisional financial settlement was announced mid-December and is quite shocking as far as Dorset CC and CBC-EDDC are concerned. For CBC the Grant will fall by 56% to £310,000 in 2016-17 and reduce to zero in 2017-18. This effect when combined with changes to the amount retained by CBC of Business Rates **puts CBC into a projected funding deficit in 2018-19. The same is true for EDDC.**

Dorset CC was already looking for additional savings to balance its books but now looks like losing 45% of the grant next year and the rest of it the following year. **This would mean DCC (still £3 million adrift for 2015-16) would need to find an additional £7.4 million (on top of the £13m already planned) in order to balance its budget in 2016/17, and then more in 2017/18.**

This level of financial leverage virtually forces amalgamation upon local authorities and since we agree with you that a merger of Christchurch with Bournemouth, East Dorset and Poole to the exclusion of the remainder of Dorset is not viable appears to us to be in effect a directive to form a pan-Dorset unitary.

Second, we noted that Central Government will have new reserve legislative powers once the Cities & Local Government Act comes into force to impose change *should it choose to do so*. Whilst it is saying it has no intention of doing that, such protestations are in our view rightly being taken with a pinch of salt by many involved in this process – including us.

As you can now see from our perspective Central Government now appears to be saying one thing but doing something very different. Local people, including us, find this very confusing and it is giving rise to considerable speculation that we would like to put to a stop to.

We would be grateful therefore if you could take a moment to write to us with your current thoughts setting out how Government actions can be aligned with Government rhetoric and what you perceive developing out of all of this.

Yours sincerely

Jim Biggin

Secretary

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