

Christopher Chope MP

18a Bargates,

Christchurch,

BH23 1Q

6th January 2016

Primary School Crisis in Christchurch – Marsh Lane Site Planning Application No.8/15/0665

Dear Mr Chope,

I am writing to you as Chairman of the Christchurch Schools Action Group with the responsibility of representing not only parents and infants currently affected by the current schools crisis in Christchurch, but also those living in the area who have children that are due to attend infant school for the first time within the next couple of years.

As I hope you are aware, there are currently approximately 90 children aged between 4 and 7 years old that did not get in to any school within the defined catchment area who are currently being educated in the temporary 'School within a School' now known as Twynham Primary School. We have been working closely with Dorset County Council since early 2013 to find a suitable site for the provision of a new school facility to cater for the increased demand in school places within Christchurch, with a specific geographical area within the borough being most affected. It was predicted in 2013 that the demand for school places, specifically in the Hurn, St Catherines, Jumpers and Portfield areas would increase and this has been proven with numbers rising from 26 four year olds in 2013, 32 in 2014 and 38 in the September 2015 intake being affected; the numbers in 2015 even surprised us as this meant that even the 'School within a School' was now oversubscribed; as I have already stated, there are now approximately 90 children and we expect at least another 30 in September 2016 to find themselves in a similar position...not the most positive start to a four year olds first experience of education I think you'll agree.

To put things into perspective, no 4 year old (without a sibling already in a Christchurch school) residing in the North and West Christchurch wards of Hurn and St Catherines got into a school in the catchment area in 2015. Almost all of the Jumpers ward also didn't get any school in catchment, and the North Western part of Portfield is also affected. In 2013, the last child admitted to Christchurch Infants School lived 0.6706 miles away, 2014 0.616 miles and 2015 0.558 miles, a worrying trend! The result of is that a large section of the Borough and the communities within it are now left without any provision of a local primary school within the catchment area where they live and the problem is only going to get worse if we do not act now and provide what is desperately needed as a result of these exceptional circumstances.

Throughout this process, we (the parents, families and ultimately, your constituents affected) expected your full support on this matter but it was soon apparent that this would not be forthcoming, firstly due to your complete lack of interest or involvement, then on Monday 15th June 2015 during the House of Commons debate you raised a question with the Secretary of State, Nicky Morgan regarding the land identified as being the only site suitable which was perceived to be less than supportive of our plight. I did contact you at the time, again in my capacity as Chairman of the

Christchurch Schools Action Group expressing our disappointment and I have provided that email to this letter as an Appendix (Appendix A) to refresh your memory. I might add that neither I nor any other parent that wrote to you received any response from yourself apart from the email from your secretary nor have you sat down with any parent involved to understand the plight and extent of the exceptional circumstances surrounding this issue since; there has been no communication whatsoever from yourself as our local MP which we are all completely perplexed with.

Coming to the present day, you are aware that the Marsh Lane site in Jumpers has been identified by all involved in this process over the last 3 years, including independent consultants, as being the only suitable site to serve the needs of the communities affected considering the exceptional circumstances surrounding the situation and therefore, planning was submitted by Dorset County Council on the 1st December 2015 for the long awaited construction of a new school on the Marsh Lane site. It has recently come to our attention that a letter was sent by yourself at the request of a resident of Marsh Lane to the Rt Hon Greg Clark MP formally requesting that he *'call in for your own determination the planning application made by Dorset County Council by itself (Application No.8/15/0665) to develop a site wholly within the Green Belt for the construction of a new school'*. It is not the 'calling in itself' that we have the issue with as we fully expect the proper due process to take place and are aware that this will need to go in front of the Secretary of State due to it being Green belt, neither is it your complete lack of support for your constituents affected, the issue we have is with the inaccuracies you are portraying as fact within your communication with the Secretary of State, specifically within your letter dated 30th December, these being:

'more than 600 individual letters of objection have been received by the county council from local residents. This demonstrates the strength of local feeling about the matter'.

This is incorrect, DCC have received approximately 600 preformatted petition forms generated by an action group opposing the school and not individual letters. Of the 600 forms, only about 150 forms have comments individually noted on the form. Approximately 38 separate, individual letters and/or electronic objections were also submitted. You failed to mention the 280 individual electronic online forms of support that were submitted without a door knocking campaign but rather through the free will of people genuinely understanding the situation and supporting the planning based on the facts; these figures are based on the information posted on the DCC planning website on 5th January 2016.

The local feeling on this is not as clear as you would like to make out. For information, any 4 year old living on and in the vicinity of Marsh Lane did not get a place in a school in catchment in 2015, this is now likely to remain the same indefinitely until a new school is built; Marsh lane and the surrounding area is seriously affected by this...I'm just not sure the residents are aware of it!

'There is widespread belief locally that the reason that the County Council is seeking to build a new school on green belt land is because such land is far less expensive than land that is not in the Green Belt. Indeed, some alternative sites which have been identified have been rejected by the County Council on the grounds that they would cost too much'.

Again, this statement is extremely misleading and is based on hearsay, scaremongering and not the facts presented. Both the Christchurch Schools Action Group and Dorset County Council had discussed these sites in detail before they were proposed by other parties. It was apparent early on in the process that due to the exceptional circumstance surrounding this issue that none of the alternative sites identified were suitable and that the Marsh Lane site was the ONLY viable option available. To ensure impartiality, Dorset County Council employed an independent consult to review the alternative sites and the conclusion was that none of the sites were suitable and the Marsh Lane site was the only option available. As a representative for the parents and children affected, we

would have been thrilled with the identification of a suitable brownfield site for the new school as the likelihood is that it would have been built by now and the children would all be settled in their new school and the problem would be solved. I'm sure the red tape and work behind the scenes over the last 2 years to ensure the correct progression of this application wouldn't have been cheap; I'm sure all involved would have been quite happy to have found a suitable 'more expensive' brownfield site. As for the comment that County Council have rejected sites on the grounds that they would cost too much, I am yet to see any evidence supporting your statement and I would be happy to review the evidence you have detailing this fact.

'I enclose with this letter a copy of one of the letters of objection which helps explain why this proposal is so contentious. It also exemplifies the nature and extent of local opposition'

You have provided one letter from a single resident who lives on Marsh Lane and whose house backs on to the proposed site. You have failed to provide any details of the reasons why the school should be built, why Marsh Lane is the only site, what the exceptional circumstances are surrounding this issue and worst of all, you have given the impression that this is a one sided debate without any support for the planning application. I think I echo everyone I represent including the families and friends of those affected when I say that you have failed to take any interest in this issue, failed to communicate either with us as the action group or any individual parent involved, failed to show any courtesy in responding to your constituents supporting this application where requested, failed to educate yourself on the facts surrounding both the exceptional circumstances and evidence provided by Dorset County Council as part of the planning process and worst of all, failed the children who are the future of the constituency you represent.

The Marsh Lane site is not a choice, it is a necessity!

'I hope you agree that the only way in which the integrity of the Local Plan process can be maintained is for such a contentious proposal to be subject to a public Inquiry before an independent inspector'

I hope Mr Chope that the Secretary of State and any others that would be involved in the decision making of this planning process choose to make up their own minds based on the evidence and facts presented to them and not the information that you are providing them which is misleading at best. I hope that they will understand the exceptional circumstances surrounding this issue that makes the Marsh Lane site the only option available for the building of the new school. The children have waited long enough for a permanent school and the community deserves the peace of mind that children will be provided with a local educational facility. We are fast approaching critical mass where the Twynham site cannot take any more children and therefore, time is now of the essence. If the planning is not authorised, there is no plan B meaning at least 120 children will be displaced and without a school; we have asked you the question before and so we will ask you again, what is your Plan B?

I sincerely hope you have the decency to respond to the parents and children of Christchurch this time. I will forward a hardcopy of this letter to your office by post to include my details for your information.

Yours sincerely,



Nicholas Smith

Appendix A

Email sent to Christopher Chope MP on 1st July 2015

From: Christchurch Schools Action Group [mailto:christchurchschoolsag@hotmail.co.uk]

Sent: 01 July 2015 22:26

To: CHOPE, Christopher

Subject: New School

Dear Christopher,

I am writing to you with reference to your comments in the Echo regarding the much needed school proposed to be built on Marsh Lane by DCC. As you don't seem to be aware of the history regarding the shortage of primary school places in the North and West Christchurch areas (which I find unbelievable as we all live in your constituency!), this has been an issue first identified by parents in April of 2013 when 26 children from the same community were not offered a place in any school within the Twynham catchment area for the 2013 September intake. Since then, we have set up an action group (Christchurch Schools Action Group) to campaign for the provision of access to a local school for the affected community. We initially had very positive meetings with Jackie Last (Then Director of Children's Services at DCC) which then started the process to build a new school for the affected area of Christchurch (long term) with the short term plan being the provision of access to education locally of which Christchurch Infants School and DCC as promised, did provide until the new facility is built. As predicted by the parents, in 2013, the number of children based in the North and West Christchurch area who applied and did not get a place at a school in catchment has steadily risen from 26 in 2013 to 30 in 2014 and more recently, 38 in 2015 (this year's applications). Currently, this means that approximately 90 children will be attending Twynham Infants School by October 2015 which as you know, will be based at Twynham senior school until the new school is built.

We (Christchurch Schools Action Group) have been part of the process with DCC from day one, meeting on a regular basis and discussing options regarding where the new school would be situated; I'm sure you are well aware of the geography of Christchurch and therefore I don't need to tell you that adequate land for building a school is scarce especially considering the Conservatives policy to build new homes which is one of the reasons we are now in this mess. All options have been considered and the conclusion is that Marsh Lane is the only suitable site both in size and geography...the new school needs to serve the area affected. To add insult to injury, construction has begun on the Christchurch Hospital site which includes the building of another 80 or so houses which isn't going to improve this problem but I suspect, make it worse. To give you an idea, any child located outside of a half mile radius of Christchurch Infants School did not get a place at any school in their catchment area in 2015.

We are all very disappointed that you are not supporting the new school for the local community. All these houses are being built in Christchurch with no infrastructure in place to support them; where are the children going to be educated once the housing is built at Christchurch Hospital, Christchurch Police Station and other identified town centre sites earmarked for housing??

I understand that Marsh Lane is green belt but unfortunately there is no other land in Christchurch suitable. We went through this with DCC two and a half years ago. This school NEEDS to be in West Christchurch to support our community. By 2015 there will be 90 children at the Twynham Site, they could take another intake, so that will make 120 children at least, and where do you expect them to go after that? May I suggest that as it was Conservative policy for the building of new homes without putting the infrastructure in place to support the increased population, that you consider doing your homework before blindly commenting on such a sensitive subject especially when you don't appear to have an alternative to the land in question.

Whilst we have been very impressed with support we have received from Margaret Phipps and Sue Spittle over the last couple of years, we are extremely disappointed that your first overt communication regarding this subject was such a negative, ignorant and one sided view.....not once have you spoken to any of the parents affected! Whilst we have had the full support from our county and local councillors who are members of your own party, we have had no communication with you at all since this began, we are 2 weeks away from the submission of plans in what should be the start of something amazing and the end of 2 1/2 years of uncertainty, stress and tears for all involved then now at the 11th hour..

Christchurch MP Chris Chope recently raised the issue of the new school in Parliament.

In a question to the education secretary, Nicky Morgan, he asked if Dorset County Council should be allowed to grant itself planning permission to build a school on greenbelt land, "in breach of the local core strategy".

T2. [900286] **Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con):** Does my right hon. Friend agree that a local education authority should not be allowed to give itself planning permission to build a school on green-belt land, in breach of the local core strategy? That is exactly what Dorset County Council is proposing to do in Marsh Lane, Christchurch. If the Secretary of State cannot answer today, will she have a meeting with me to discuss this important matter?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The national planning policy framework contains clear guidelines on building on green-belt land, and of course he, like others, has the opportunity to call in any planning application for determination by the Secretary of State. If he wants to give us further details, I am sure we will follow them up.

We would welcome a response regarding your alternative solution for the provision of access to local primary education for the areas of North and West Christchurch should Marsh Lane not succeed and question why your support is not in-line with your local and county councillors. I think an explanation is the least the parents deserve.

We expected your support.

We would welcome your comments.

Regards,

Nick Smith

(Chairman - Christchurch Schools Action Group)

Reply from the office of Christopher Chope MP (Received 2nd July 2015) – address was supplied via email but no response received.

Dear Mr Smith,

Thank you for your email. Please can you let Mr Chope have your address so that he can respond?

With best wishes,

Christo Chope

Christo Chope

Secretary to Christopher Chope OBE MP

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

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