

Sent to ACRA by email 7th February 2016

Thank you for your email of 24th January.

I had intended responding when the Government had announced its final decision following consultation on the provisional financial settlement to which you refer. This had been expected last week but is now expected tomorrow afternoon.

As you may know, I have made representations to the Government and had meetings with Government Ministers to express my concern about the raw deal for Dorset County Council and the District Councils. I will not know until tomorrow the extent to which, if at all, these concerns have led to changes.

Irrespective of how tough the financial settlement is, it will not require the merger of local authorities in Dorset. As Christchurch and East Dorset have shown already, savings can be made in the cost of delivering services without removing the responsibility for those services from local Councillors.

You express some scepticism that Ministers may not honour their commitment that they will not impose change on Councils against their will. I continue to be assured that Dorset will be allowed to retain its existing structures. My assessment is that central government would, ideally, like all local authorities to be mere deliverers on their behalf of statutory services such as social services, care for the elderly and refuse collection. Those local services which are discretionary, such as libraries, parks, arts and recreation, have always been of less interest to central government.

Against the background I have described, it is, in my view, essential that local people should fight hard to protect their control over the discretionary services which define and differentiate one local authority area from another. In Christchurch, for example, we are proud to support Highcliffe Castle, our parks and beaches and admire East Dorset for their partnership with the Forestry Commission at Moors Valley.

The local service which makes the greatest difference to the lives of local people is planning. It would be less sensitive and accountable to local opinion if important planning decisions were made by Councillors without local knowledge.

It may be correct that the creation of a unitary Dorset would help the County Council because it would then be able to divert council tax income to its statutory services and reduce the money currently used by District

Councils for local discretionary services. But that would be a major assault upon localism and is one of the reasons why I believe that any structural change in local government should be subject to proper consultation with electors. If an increase in council tax above 2% requires a local referendum then, surely, major structural change should also require such a referendum.

I would be very happy to meet with members of the Residents' Associations in your alliance at a mutually convenient time. Although it might suit the Government agenda, local residents should not allow themselves to be seduced into acceptance of radical change which could be very much against their long term interests. Big Government always hopes that it will be able to take advantage of local inertia. This must not happen in Christchurch.

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