

## [The Post Office counters closure in Wokingham](#)

I have talked to the Labour party campaigners collecting signatures in town today to object to the closure of the counters in the current building. They tell me they have now seen a letter saying the Consultation will only be about the facilities in Smiths, and not about the principle of the closure and switch, which was not made clear to me when I contacted them. I will therefore write to the Post Office setting out public objections to the closure and asking them to think again.

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## [Visit to Wokingham sorting office](#)

I went to thank the Post Office staff for all their hard work delivering the Christmas cards and parcels at the Wokingham Sorting office on Friday morning. They have done a good job handling the big volumes so far, and report plenty of packages as people shop on line for some presents.

I asked the Manager for their views on the possible move of the front counters to a retail store and confirmed I will be making representations about that when they share more details with us. The relationship between the Sorting office and the counters is one of the issues a move would raise. Currently we go to the counters to retrieve mail they could not deliver, and they can produce the parcels quickly from the back sorting office.

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## [What should the Prime Minister do now?](#)

The Prime Minister needs to understand that her Agreement cannot pass the Commons. All the Opposition parties oppose it. The DUP hate it. Around 100 Conservative MPs have stated in public they do not agree with it.

A substantial number of those MPs might change their vote on the Agreement if the Northern Ireland backstop were removed completely, or if there was an unambiguous and straightforward way for the UK to end it unilaterally once imposed. Whilst the vote on the Agreement would then be narrower, there would still be a substantial group of Conservative MPs who would oppose the Agreement for wider reasons often set out here. The Prime Minister ignores these other problems – the large sum of money committed for nothing, the

indeterminate period left in the customs union, the vulnerability of our economy to new laws and regulations that could hurt us – all summed up as the opposite of the Leave we voted for. She assumes she could get practically every DUP and Conservative MP to change their minds.

She also assumed in the Confidence Vote meeting that the EU will offer some legally binding text which does scupper the Backstop. That looks extremely unlikely, given the stance of the EU so far. If we assume they are not bluffing when they say they will not re open the Withdrawal Agreement text it is difficult to see any reassurance or political declaration about the Backstop persuading the DUP and other critics, as what matters is the law as written rather than statements of how a future EU might behave. One of the problems with that is the imminent European Parliament elections and a new Commission, so what is the value of any promises by the current set up?

I have the following questions for the PM

What legal text have you tabled to remove the Backstop? Will you share it with us as we might agree with it?

What indications if any are there that the EU will moderate its stance and resume talks about legal change to the Backstop part of the Agreement?

If there is no new text and no prospect of talks to change this draft law, how do you envisage getting the DUP back on board to support the government?

If the DUP remain largely detached, how can the government proceed with its wider programme of work?

What action if any are you taking to deal with the other large problems with the Agreement as around 400 MPs see it?

If there are no good answers to these questions, then the PM should come to the Commons and announce that unfortunately the Agreement cannot be fixed so she is withdrawing it. She should then return to the EU and discuss the best way to proceed to exit, with accelerated work on the various agreements it would be nice to have to make it easier for both sides. She should finally get round to tabling a Canada style free trade agreement and set out again how the Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland border can be handled much as now. This present currency, Excise, VAT and anti terrorist border could also be a customs and regulatory border, with most of the checks done well away from the border and the information shared electronically in advance of the border crossing. Managed exit without a Withdrawal Agreement is what most Leave voters want, given the penal and one sided nature of the Withdrawal Agreement.

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## **The West Berkshire Council settlement – spending power up by 4.2%**

I lobbied the Minister on behalf of West Berkshire as well as Wokingham, and urged the case for more money for local services and priorities. During the year we got extra money for social care and potholes. In the settlement for 2019-20 the Council will get a boost of 4.2% to spending power, compared to the England average of 2.8%, and a useful increase over inflation.

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## **The Wokingham local government settlement – spending power up 6.3%**

I have been working hard on the issues around money for local services in Wokingham. During this year I have welcomed favourable responses to requests on potholes and road maintenance, and on social care, where there were particular pressures.

I argued for two main improvements in overall funding for Wokingham for 2019-20. First, I wanted to continue with the business rate retention pilot we have benefitted from this year. The government has confirmed we can do so. Second, I wanted to eliminate the threat of negative grant, and ensure a decent level of settlement for the overall budget.

Yesterday in his statement the Secretary of State said he

“intends to directly eliminate the £152.9m negative rate support grant in 2019-20 using foregone business rates. This will prevent any local authority being subject to a downward adjustment”

As a result Wokingham will see one of the largest increases in spending power, with a gain of 6.3% compared to the England average of 2.8%. I look forward to seeing the improvements in services and the good value Council Tax this should allow.