

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.

Update on Mrs May

Since I wrote this piece it has become clear that the EU is not in the business of re-opening the Agreement at all. They have also moved away from offering more formal reassurances which seemed to be on offer in draft. Instead more of them saying the disagreement between the Commons and the Prime Minister on the Agreement is another reason to need the backstop insurance. The Prime Minister has changed her language back to reassurances from legal changes.

It is difficult to see the DUP coming back on board given the lack of any legal text to remove the backstop. Were there to be a change of heart by the EU in the new year on this matter, there are still considerably more Conservative MPs than the government majority with the DUP who oppose the Agreement for a wide range of reasons including sending them too much money, delaying our exit without a clear end date, and putting us under EU rules for an indeterminate period with no vote or voice on what new burdens and requirements they might impose.

Mrs May's position

On Wednesday Mrs May gained 63% support from Conservative MPs, or as Jacob Rees Mogg points out lost the support of around 70% of all those MPs who do not have some job granted to them by her. This assumes all those who express public loyalty to her in office voted accordingly. I imagine most of them did. Most of those who could not do so have already resigned.

Earlier in the day it appeared that her team was worried about the vote. She therefore changed her position on two important matters. She told us she no longer planned to lead the party into the next General election, assuming that is in 2022. There were various MPs prepared for her to carry on for a bit longer who were nonetheless saying they wanted a new leader for the election . She also told us she was returning again to the continent to seek legal changes to the Irish backstop arrangement. This was different from previous language, when in line with the EU she was talking about gaining clarifications and reassurances without changing the text of the Withdrawal Agreement.

She did not clarify if she would lead the Conservatives were there to be an earlier election. Nor did she clarify what kind of legal change she was seeking or how she will persuade the EU to re open the text of the Withdrawal Agreement. She also has said that any re opening could re open features of the Agreement like Gibraltar and fishing that some in the EU want to make worse from the UK point of view, so it is an option with risks.

What difference does this make? It has revealed to the government and public that there are 117 Conservative MPs who lack confidence in the PM, which is largely related to their opposition to the Withdrawal Agreement she has made her own. It is therefore difficult to see how Mrs May can present her Agreement to the Commons and secure support for it. She says she plans to get a change to the Irish backstop. The first test of any new words forthcoming from the EU will be the reaction of the DUP. If the DUP do not accept the revisions as sufficient to banish the Irish backstop, the government will remain with no reliable majority, subject to endless alarms over trying to sustain its position in Commons votes. The DUP have always made clear the whole backstop has to go. Many Conservatives want it out or want a clear legal ability of the UK to cancel it unilaterally, which of course means it is not then the kind of backstop the EU insists on. The significance of the backstop is it would treat Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK, and would create a border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. I and others have made clear our opposition to the backstop, but also to several other important features of the Agreement. Even if they could delete the backstop I would still oppose the Agreement.

The Prime Minister needs to rebuild her support amongst Conservative and DUP MPs as an urgent priority. Winning the confidence vote is only a first step.

She now has to adopt an EU policy that can command support within her coalition, which the current Agreement lamentably fails to do. Any attempt to find a way of harnessing Labour votes to offset the large slice of Conservative and DUP votes she does not command on this issue is likely to be a fruitless quest, given Labour's understandable wish to have a General election and unwillingness to name a particular proposal for exit that they can unite to support. Any attempt to woo Labour would also increase the numbers of Conservative MPs who oppose the Prime Minister.

Coming soon – Union Jack and the Beanstalk a topical retake on an old tale

John you are going to be busy, a few days ago you promised your take on exiting on WTO rules, now you offer "topical retake on an old tale", or are the two the same? I dearly hope not!

Please tell me that my wish for a WTO Brexit is not just an old fairy-tale...

A managed exit without signing the Withdrawal Agreement – you will still be able to travel to the continent

One of the sillier Project Fear scares has been that if we just leave the EU there will be no agreements in place to allow planes to fly to and from the EU and the UK.

The Transport Secretary has recently reported that the UK has now concluded all of the third country aviation agreements needed with non EU countries, save four small countries still to be completed. Those agreed include the USA, Canada, Switzerland and Israel.

Within the EU the Commission has made clear that in all circumstances including a so called No deal exit there will be an agreement between the UK and EU after Brexit allowing routine aviation to continue as before between the UK and EU.

Individual member states have also expressed a willingness to put in place

any arrangements needed to ensure continuation of air services.

As I have pointed out, leading UK and continental airlines are busy selling tickets for after March 29 2019, and have every reason to suppose they will be able to honour those contracts. People can book their business trips and holidays as normal, and expect the planes to fly subject only to the usual things that might delay or lead to flight cancellations which have nothing to do with Brexit.

Some Remain supporters have been worried that somehow it will be more difficult to travel, to visit the continent, to share cultural events or enjoy each other's facilities and places of interest. There are no grounds to suppose there will be new restrictions. There were no visas required before we joined the EU, and none are likely to be imposed once we leave. Were the continent to refuse to recognise UK driving licences the Post Office will be able to issue acceptable international permits for £10.