



Department for
Communities and
Local Government

Councillor Matthew Crow
Chorley Borough Council

By e-mail matthew.crow@chorley.gov.uk

Kris Hopkins MP
Minister for Local Government

Department for Communities and Local
Government
4th Floor, Fry House
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

Tel: 0303 444 3460
Fax: 020 7828 4903
E-Mail: kris.hopkins@communities.gsi.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/dclg

Our Ref: ER/KH/020471/14

01 SEP 2014

Thank you for your e-mail of 22 July to the Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP seeking advice on the decision of Chorley Council to conduct a referendum on whether to establish itself as a unitary authority. I have been asked to reply as Minister for Local Government and apologise for the delay in doing so.

I do not think it is correct to say that the Secretary of State encouraged the council to hold a referendum. This is entirely a matter for the council but it would do so in the knowledge of the Government's position on reorganising local government which is that, whilst we do not see unitary authorities themselves as a bad thing, given the precarious state of public finances the Government is of the view that now is not the time to undertake resource intensive and disruptive restructuring of local government. We believe that it is just not sensible to disrupt and distract local government from the core task of devolving and providing services in a cost efficient and effective way for the benefit of citizens – especially when such a change is bound to be controversial. Frankly we do not believe that the solution to the problems of local government lies in unitary restructuring at this present time.

Instead, we believe local authorities should be working collaboratively together across boundaries; there is great potential for more locally-led joint working and sharing of services in local government and between different local public services. Such sharing could be delivered immediately, without complex unitary restructuring or permission from Whitehall.

Nevertheless, as stated in the Government's response to the Heseltine review published in March 2013, where local authorities wish to pursue unitary status, "the Government will not stand in the way of areas that would like to voluntarily adopt this approach where this would unambiguously result in greater efficiencies". However, this would require all the affected councils to agree; in the circumstances I would suggest that, given the impact such a change might have on Lancashire county council, their views would be an important consideration in any proposals for change put to the Secretary of State.

I am afraid we cannot give advice on the type of question that might be used in a referendum were one to be held. Section 116 of the Local Government Act 2003 provides a power that enables local authorities to conduct an advisory poll or referendum. There is no obligation on a local authority to hold such a poll, nor any requirement to act in accordance with the result of such a poll. The extent of this power is broadly drawn, allowing authorities to hold a poll on any matter relating to the services for which it is responsible. The process to be followed and the organisation of such local referendums are entirely at the discretion of the council. I would suggest however that any question ought to be neutrally expressed – the Electoral Commission might be able to provide advice on suitable wording.

KRIS HOPKINS MP