

DorsetCAN Case Study 6: How to relate to your MP

In November 2019, in the run-up to the General Election, Transition Town Bridport and the Central Reform Church in Bridport organised in the church an election hustings for candidates for the West Dorset constituency, with a focus on the environment and the climate crisis. Chris Loder, Conservative candidate, stated that, if elected, he would set up a West Dorset Environment Forum, with himself as Chairman, in order to promote direct exchanges on environmental issues between the public, local authorities and himself.

Five environmental organisations in the western part of the constituency – Transition Town Bridport, Turn Lyme Green, Friends of the Earth West Dorset, Beaminster Area ECO Group and Beaminster St Mary’s ECO Church Group – had witnessed that statement. We were already in close touch with each other. We decided, in March 2020, to ask Chris Loder about the proposed Forum. He responded that he was too busy with Covid to pursue the idea. When we approached him again in July, he agreed to meet us by Zoom. During the first meeting, he said he was in no hurry to start the Forum, but he encouraged us to work as a group and promised to have quarterly meetings with us. So, we decided to set ourselves up as West Dorset Environmental Alliance, with the aim to share information and ideas, to cooperate in advocacy to Dorset Council and others, and specifically to work with the MP. We rotate the chairmanship on a quarterly basis. Each body remains independent.

So far we have held three Zoom meetings with Chris Loder, each of over one hour. We find that he is well engaged with key issues, including improved public transport (he is an ex railway manager); air pollution, particularly at Chideock, which is recorded as having the highest level of air pollution in England; and single-use plastic, on which he is working with Friends of the Earth to shape a Plastics Bill which aims to cut at source the use of single-use plastic. He has strong views about planning, being opposed to large housing estates and in favour of small development to sustain the vitality of villages.



Chris Loder MP

Our meetings with him are candid, informal, open to new subjects, but always with a pre-agreed agenda. He has invited us to prepare short position papers on issues with which he was not familiar or which worry us. The subjects have included :

- the Plastics Bill
- retrofit of existing houses to make them energy-efficient, with the difficulty of using the Government’s Green Homes scheme
- measures to create renewable energy, for example solar panels or heat pumps
- Water Quality and the Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill
- the former patterns of European funds which benefitted rural communities in rural Dorset, and the prospects for continuity of such funding following Brexit
- Dorset Local Plan
- The Government’s Green Revolution and its application in Dorset.

Chris Loder appreciates the expertise that we apply to these briefing papers: he commented that it is “rare for a Conservative MP to have a free private research unit”. For us, the benefit is to get a politician’s view of the evolution of national policy and to gain his input into legislative processes that matter to us. The benefit is mutual. Within the Alliance, constant exchange of ideas is very helpful to our campaigning and practical action.

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