

## **Cllr Christopher's E-mailed Report – 25 March 2023.**

I look forward to discussing A35 and other transport matters on Tuesday and reiterate points on a few areas before we meet.

This report has a focus on money and also farming and the environment.

Many of these topics are again impacted by Dorset, and indeed West Dorset, being largely rural and largely within the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, you will see that this is a repeated theme in this report.

**Dorset Council's budget** of £348m for 2023-24 has been approved by councillors at the Full Council meeting on 14 February. This continues the council's commitment to maintain frontline services, without the need for cuts to balance the budget. Dorset Council provides around 450 different services to just under 380,000 residents. This year's budget setting exercise took place against a national background of extreme pressures for councils. These pressures include the high level of inflation which affects the cost of delivering council services, also the continued growth in need for social care services as a result of the ageing population.

Council tax will increase next year by just under 2% and the adult social care precept by 2%. This is less than the maximum 5% increase available to councils, as outlined in the Government's Spending Review in December 2022. The increase is equivalent to £1.40 extra per week for a Band D property. This is a balanced budget in a national context of significant financial challenge. Our overriding aim has been to protect the essential frontline council services on which residents and businesses rely. The proposals do include a council tax increase; however, we have kept it to the minimum possible despite the high level of inflation and we continue to provide a range of support for those residents hardest hit by the cost of living.

Since becoming a unitary council in 2019, we have made efficiency savings of £76 million. This money has been reinvested to protect frontline services, including funding the growing need for adult social care with our ageing population. Our prudent budget management has meant that Dorset has not faced the same cuts to essential services as many other areas. However, we continue to lobby Government for fairer funding for Dorset so that we can reduce the burden on local taxpayers in future.

### **Cost of Living Help**

We have set aside £2M from our reserves to help residents with the cost-of-living crisis. This is a one-off allocation, and we will use this to target financial support in the short-term and include some longer-term solutions to issues such as the challenge of energy costs for residents through property improvement schemes.

In short, Dorset Councillors voted in unanimous support of Cllr Spencer Flower's proposal for a £2m cost-of-living support fund for residents in today's Cabinet meeting. The £2m will be funded from the council's reserves. Proposals were developed by officers in response to the request from Cllr Flower, Leader of Dorset Council.

The fund will support a range of projects to provide immediate and longer-term support to those residents hardest hit by the cost of living. Projects include:

- Support for low-income households, disabled people, and vulnerable older people with measures to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.
- Off-grid energy discretionary vouchers for households reliant on off-grid energy sources (oil and gas)
- Additional Discretionary Housing Payment allowance to help prevent residents becoming homeless.
- Supermarket vouchers for residents in greatest need
- Further support for Dorset's network of social supermarkets, community fridges and food banks
- Additional pre-school hours for 3–4-year-olds, enabling more parents to work.
- 'Ready to thrive' locality programme to support children with their readiness to start school.

Dorset Council works closely with partners such as Citizens Advice Dorset, Age UK North, South and West Dorset, the NHS and Jobcentre Plus through the 'Dorset Together' network to provide support for residents in greatest need.

Dorset Council has provided significant support to residents with the cost of living over recent months, including:

- Paying out over £18m to over 127,000 households in energy rebates
- Helping 615 households facing homelessness
- Providing free holiday activities and food to nearly 2000 children eligible for free school meals
- Providing 10,500 supermarket vouchers to eligible households.
- Supporting over 80 'warm hubs' where people can go for company and warmth.

However, there is still a need for additional support with the cost of living. The most recent tranche of Household Support Funding in January was fully claimed by eligible residents within hours of going live, showing the high level of need.

Cllr Spencer Flower, Leader of Dorset Council, said:

"High prices continue to put pressure on household finances, and I am acutely aware of the need to support our most vulnerable residents, including families, disabled people, and older people.

"I asked officers to develop this comprehensive package of support which will be supplement to the work we have already done to help people with the cost of living. The measures will be carefully targeted at those residents with the greatest need and will provide immediate support with food and energy costs. The measures will also leave a legacy through investment in energy efficiency of homes and support for children with early year education and starting school."

### **I continue my work on road safety.**

This is a major concern for the majority of Marshwood Vale residents. I will of course be having further meetings with those with considerable power e.g., Police Commissioner David Sidwick and Chris Loder for example to once more discuss my concerns .

THINK! Road Safety tweeted earlier this month "Speed kills and injured 54 young people a week" The campaign by THINK road safety highlights the risks of going even a few mph too fast for the road. We are encouraging young drivers to choose the right speed for the conditions".

To put this into context as reported in the Times newspaper earlier this month.

"Young men speeding on rural roads will be targeted in a road safety campaign intended to reduce the numbers killed each year.

Speed kills or injures 54 young people every week in the UK and safety experts have found less than half ( 43 per cent ) of young men consider exceeding the speed limit to be unacceptable .

Dorset Council replied " We have a lot of rural roads in Dorset and too many young people are seriously harmed due to travelling too fast on these roads, so we fully support this campaign.

I now turn to planning matters and will speak about the position of Dorset Council on Thursday evening. My comments will be on the debate about building the right number of houses in the right place but for now I will provide comments on policy that while not thought of as having an impact on residential development at Parish level may have an impact on Biodiversity net gain for landowners.

**Defra has announced plans for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)**, which will be mandatory for some applications for development in England from November 2023. The government announcement also states that BNG will offer payments for others to provide the land for developers to use.

Over 12 months ago, **Defra consulted** on proposals to ensure that new development delivered an increase in biodiversity. Last week, **Defra produced its response**,

The good news is that there is a separate scheme for small sites, an exemption for single dwellings and self-build, permitted development and the provision of a statutory credits .

From November 2023, BNG will need to be provided on larger sites, from April 2024 on smaller sites and from November 2025 for National Strategic Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs). Developments will have to show that they will deliver a 10% uplift in biodiversity over and above what has been lost to the development. This resulting habitat will need to be maintained for at least 30 years, with a separate method needed for dealing with what is defined as irreplaceable habitat.

The land on which BNG has been secured will have to be registered with Natural England. Defra has clarified that it will be acceptable to use the same land to deliver both BNG and nutrient neutrality offsetting if the management is compatible, but not for carbon schemes.

Where BNG cannot be delivered on-site, then BNG credits can be purchased on the open market, and statutory credits will be available for purchase from Natural England. While Natural England is going to be the BNG site register operator, the government does not have the intention to establish a trading platform - it sees this as something that the market should develop.

Natural England will not have an enforcement role – it will be down to the local authority through planning conditions, conservation covenants, or by commercial contracts between the developer and the BNG provider. Should the contract to provide BNG or the habitat be broken because it is difficult to establish or maintain, then the penalties could be substantial. This will be part of the contract enabling the delivery of the development.

There will be two schemes:

- A small scheme with its own metric to cover areas of less than 1ha or up to nine houses or 1000m<sup>2</sup>.
- A larger scheme to capture all other development.

It is not intended that temporary land uses should be caught by BNG, nor permitted development land used as permitted or land within protected landscapes that otherwise would have benefited from permitted development rights.

For those planning development caught by the changes, it is likely they will seek to organise BNG provision now, well ahead of submitting any development proposals. It could be a significant extra financial burden.

For landowners who see the provision of land as a BNG offset for land developed elsewhere, the money offered by developers might look attractive now, it will have to cover the establishment of the habitat and its maintenance for at least 30 years. The government does not expect the habitat to be lost at the end of this period, and while still no more BNG funding can be given to maintain the land, more BNG funding can be used to further enhance the habitat at the end of the term. It is also important to keep in mind that this land could be designated if an important habitat is established.

**Defra has introduced the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme, will run to March 2025.**

Farmers and land managers can be supported to carry out projects that support nature recovery, mitigate the impacts of climate change, provide opportunities for people to discover, enjoy and understand the landscape and cultural heritage, or support nature-friendly, sustainable farm businesses. This is a programme of funding for one-off projects covering these areas of work, not an agri-environment scheme.

The programme will fund projects that:

- Support nature recovery
- Mitigate the impacts of climate change.
- Provide opportunities for people to discover, enjoy and understand the landscape and its cultural heritage.
- Protect or improve the quality and character of the landscape or place.

I look forward to discussion of the changes being implemented in respect of farm support and indeed the budget of 15 March on Tuesday together with the ever-changing financial landscape facing Dorset Council on Tuesday.

Best regards

Simon

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