

Cllr Christopher's E-mailed Report – 25 July 2022

I understand from Ben Hampton of National Highways that he spoke to the Clerk last week re the agenda items for a future meeting. I further understand he will get a response out as soon as he can to tidy some of the items up where there is duplication or where a simple written response could be given instead.

With regard to all proposed work, I understand National Highways are continuing through feasibility and in to detailed design, and that they are on target with the programme.

Finally, he informs me that he will speak with his colleagues re the bridge works.

Prior to the meeting tomorrow, I thought that in addition to my own interim report, that I would send you a copy of the bulletin of the leader of Dorset Council Councillor Spencer Flower, as delivered to Full Council on the evening of 14 July 2022.

BULLETIN

Welcome to the Leader's bulletin, following the Full Council meeting on Thursday 14 July 2022. I wanted to bring you a few updates on:

- what we're doing to help with the cost-of-living crisis
- the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme
- our new Dorset Council 'sofa sessions'
- the 2022 Dorset Education Conference, and
- Cabinet commitments

Cost of Living Crisis

We are working closely with our partners in the 'Dorset Together' network to support residents with the cost-of-living challenge through direct financial aid, better access to housing services, urging people to act early, and signposting to support on money (debts, benefits, budgeting), food, housing, and mental health.

So far, we have paid out over £15.2 million in energy rebates to 101,635 households (84% of those identified as eligible). We are currently processing a further 3,800 applications which leaves 15,142 households yet to claim. We will be reminding residents to apply before the deadline in September.

For the Household Support Fund (HSF), applications have now closed for the voucher scheme for working-age people and we expect to distribute the full allocation of £205,000 to this group. HSF has also been distributed to families via our locality teams, to care leavers and via free school meal vouchers for school holidays. A further £705,000 is ringfenced for older people on low incomes and applications for this remain open. We are working with partners to maximise the number of older people receiving this funding. In total, our Household Support Fund allocation is £2.3 million.

Our Housing team has recently introduced a single number for all housing enquiries and a new triage team to ensure those who most urgently need help, get help first. Our Cost-of-Living Help campaign was launched in partnership with Dorset Together on 15 June, with a new Cost of Living Help web page and key messages to residents.

Homes for Ukraine scheme

Our latest figures show that we have welcomed 559 arrivals to the county, 200 of whom are children. So far, 148 sponsors have signed-up for the monthly 'thank you' payment. We continue to work closely with the Dorset Together network to provide support for those arriving and local sponsors. We have updated our refugee programme page on the Dorset Council website to include a guide for those arriving, an information pack for both guests and sponsors, and details of local support groups.

A Dorset Welcome Fund has also been established to help refugees settle into the county, set up by the Dorset Community Fund and supported by Dorset Council. This will be distributed through local voluntary groups and charities.

A huge thank you to everyone who has been involved with the efforts to co-ordinate the support for Ukraine across Dorset county.

Dorset Council “Sofa Sessions”

It has never been more important for Dorset Council to be listening to its residents. We are here to serve our communities and the best way to do that is to listen to them, and work with them to ensure the services we provide meet their needs. It is all too easy to become remote and detached from our residents and because of this we are running some “sofa sessions” to get out there and listen.

Led by Cllr Laura Beddow (Portfolio Holder for Culture, Communities and Customer Services), the council is trialling five new sessions in high streets across Dorset this summer. These will literally involve elected members chatting to local residents on a sofa assisted by a few officers. We will be in busy locations mainly on a few selected dates over the summer. Members will be made aware of dates and times shortly.

The towns selected this summer are Blandford, Bridport, Ferndown, Wareham, and Weymouth.

Dorset Education Conference

In early July, two conferences were held by Children’s Services at Lytchett Minster School. At our Education Conference, we were joined by leaders from over 100 Dorset schools, professionals, and partners as we listened to nationally and internationally celebrated speakers and also our fantastic young people. They told of the importance of the community in helping children achieve their best outcomes and the need to make sure young people are part of our decision-making. We heard how technology is advancing education, the role schools play in inclusion, the importance of teaching life skills, and updates on the new Dorset Education Board.

At our Strategic Alliance, we were joined by our partners, professionals, members of the Dorset Youth Council and school representatives. Inspiring speakers told us about the communities, belonging, rights, equity, and inclusion in getting the best outcomes for children and young people. We also had the wonderful opportunity to work with children and young people as part of Dorset’s Takeover Challenge.

We had some great engagement before events too with some of our young people. See <https://dorsetcouncil.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=c39535cf4f9d1ca66af8d2b44&id=75412cd5a0&e=10c34c204c>

Following the announcement at Annual Council in May of the ten key priorities– the Cabinet Commitments - I have decided that to track progress and keep members and the public updated, there will be a standing item for information on the agenda for future Cabinet meetings.

The May Cabinet had a very useful, informative, and factual update on the Climate and Ecological Strategy by Cabinet Member, Cllr Ray Bryan. At the 26 July Cabinet meeting, it is anticipated that Cllr David Walsh and I will be able to give an update on the Dorset Local Plan.

For future reference Cabinet Commitment Update topics will be included on the Cabinet Forward Plan.

I hope you found the bulletin helpful and informative and that you all get the opportunity to enjoy the summer months.

Cllr Spencer Flower
Lead

Cllr Christopher’s report continued

I have met with the Secretary of State at DEFRA Rt hon George Eustace MP.

I will comment further on this at the BGPC meeting.

It is clearly helpful with the Secretary Estate and ministers remains in post despite the disturbances within HM Government

Cabinet members at Dorset Council are working closely with their counterparts at Cornwall's Council.

Both Cornwall and Dorset have substantial County Farms Estates and we have much to learn from their pilot slurry schemes .

I have set out thoughts on how farmers need extra support in my meeting with him, on 8 July 2022.

I am working with Dorset Council and officials in respect of mental health issues

I actively engage with farming and business organisations and many professionals.

I have met with our Member of Parliament to stress the importance of local businesses and connectivity generally. There is a shared concern re local health care provision.

Further there is every prospect of a change in wider tax and benefit adjustments in the near future.

During 2022 we have already seen rapid increase in inflation.

Dorset Council is trying to assist residents in financial difficulty .
Please see note at the end of this short report.

I have e mailed portfolio holder Councillor Ray Bryan for update re-funding for the Bus Service Improvement Plan

I will provide update re the withdrawal of area based agricultural subsidies and the move towards environmental based subsidies which will impact farmers whether Dorset Council Farm tenants, or otherwise at the parish council meeting. I will also report on other developments for farmers whether financial or environmental, outlined by Secretary of State George Eustace at Devon County Show last Thursday .

Now for details of financial support as a consequence of inflation:

Vulnerable people in the Dorset Council area can apply for new support to help with rising costs.

Applications are being taken from pensioners and working age people in receipt of qualifying benefits or in fuel poverty.

Please note, the fund for working age people has now closed. It is still open to pensionable age residents. If you need financial support or advice, please go to <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/cost-of-living-help> webpages to see how else you may be able to get help.

The council has been awarded the funding from the Government's Household Support Fund to provide short-term financial assistance.

The support will be via supermarket vouchers.

Vouchers will be issued to residents in the Dorset Council area with savings of less than £10,000 who meet the following criteria:

Either:

- Pensioner in receipt of Pension Credit;
- A pensioner or working age resident not in receipt of a means tested benefit who is in fuel poverty**;
- or
- Working age and in receipt of a means tested benefit* (this is now closed for working age, please see <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/cost-of-living-help> for support and advice).

*Means tested benefits are Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Rebate, Income-related ESA (Employment and Support Allowance), Income Support, Working Tax Credit or Child Tax Credit.

**Fuel poverty is defined as spending 10% of household income on energy costs

Vouchers will also be provided during the school holidays to families in receipt of free school meals.

Councillor Andrew Parry, Dorset Council Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Early Help, said:
"The Household Support Fund is there to help those who need it most.

"There is a simple online application form, and if you have any difficulties completing it, or do not use the internet, our library-based volunteer Digital Champions can assist you. Your local Citizens Advice office will also be able to help you.

"If you are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis, there is a range of support available for you, so please act now."

<https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/household-support-fund>

Residents will need their most recent bank statements, proof of benefits (if applicable), energy bill (if applicable) and identification.

The website also explains how to nominate a family member or friend if assistance is needed, or if the applicant does not have an email address.

Alternatively, applicants can get help to complete their form from a volunteer Dorset Digital Champion at their local library. To book an appointment, telephone 01305 221048(Monday to Friday, 10am to midday). See Digital Champion venue opening times.

Local Citizens Advice offices are also offering assistance. See opening times and locations or call customer services at Dorset Council on 01305 221027 for opening times.

Food vouchers during the holidays and free school meals

In line with previous school holidays, families of children who receive free school meals during term time will be provided with food vouchers over the summer holiday. These are funded by the Household Support Fund, and Dorset schools will share information about the vouchers direct with the families who receive free school meals.

If you do not claim free school meals for your child but think you might qualify, please apply by completing the online form. You can also apply for free activities for your child during the summer holidays. Check if your child can receive free school meals

Other support

Find out what other support, including council tax support, housing benefit and universal credit, is available See where you can access food at local foodbanks, community fridges and social supermarkets

Clearly there have been some farmers who delayed the purchasing of fertiliser until after 24 February and who sold part of their cereal crop forward before that date and have had cause to regret this.

The current position is changeable with crude oil prices recently in retreat .

This may not provide reassurance to households in the short term with inflation in the UK broadly at 9 per cent 8.6 per cent in America and 8 .7 per cent in Germany

Indeed inflation is at 12 per cent in Greece and 20 per cent in Estonia , hence the challenge of moving together in the Eurozone.

Indeed it maybe that that the Euro May hit parity with the dollar shortly reflecting concerns .

Charle Moore writer for the Daily Telegraph and indeed a former editor of the Daily Telegraph has spoken to audiences in West Dorset several times over the last couple of decades

In his contribution to the above paper this month on inflation he wrote (and I give you a shortened version) " As the Country emerged blinking from the Covid convalescent Ward it faced enormous, partly war driven price rises in energy and food ,growing evidence of underlying inflation well beyond the temporary costs of short supply "

Best regards

Simon

Councillor Simon Christopher

The Dorset Councillor for the Marshwood Vale

077988 33715