

## **Cllr Christopher's E-mailed Report –26 February 2024.**

A few notes prior to the meeting and discussion of road and flooding issues:

### **Reflections on the first term of Dorset Council**

At the February Full Council meeting Councillor Spencer Flower, leader of Dorset Council, reflected on how much we have achieved over the last 5 years.

Dorset Council has come a long way since May 2019, when the first all-out elections took place. The Leader of Council, set out his ambition to work across the council chamber to achieve the best outcomes for the communities of Dorset.

This ethos of our cross-party working has been judged as a success and, in recognition, he was honoured to be short listed for the Local Government Information Unit's 'Council Leader of the Year 2023' award, from over 200 nominations nationally. The annual awards event took place in November 2023, when he received his certificate as one of the final 5 nominees. He valued this recognition of our focus on ambition, outcomes, and achievements.

### **Budget setting and savings**

Budget setting can be a challenge, but the administration has enjoyed majorities of between 47 and 70 in budget votes, which many observers consider to be a ringing endorsement of our approach and ethos. One of the key reasons for this has been early member participation in reviewing and understanding budget pressures and ambitions. I give great credit to the involvement of the 2 scrutiny committees.

Dorset Council operates 2 budget cafes, which are open to all 82 members to attend, 2 scrutiny committee reviews, followed by Cabinet and then Full Council for decision. This approach has enabled strong councillor participation in budget setting not previously experienced prior to the creation of the new unitary Dorset Council.

All these savings have been reinvested into front-line services; mainly Adult Social Care, Health & Housing, and Children's Services, ensuring there have been no cuts to front-line services which are so vital in maintaining and improving social wellbeing across the communities of Dorset.

Embracing Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) has been a huge success. However, it certainly has not been an easy ride, particularly coping with the worst global pandemic in 100 years, and the future looks challenging without an uplift in central government funding. Dorset gets very little Revenue Support Grant (RSG), just £700,000 in 2024, compared to other local authorities: those largely in inner city areas get an RSG allocation ranging from £20-30 million a year. This is not fair, and I continue to lobby hard for change.

Shire county areas have been poorly funded for decades by successive governments. The Local Government sector needs a new funding formula, which applies proper weight to rurality and the aging demographic. In Dorset, we have 30% of the population who are over 65 years old and rising, compared with the national average of 19%. The burden of additional costs for social care currently falls on the local taxpayers which is unfair to the people of Dorset.

As with all councils, we must set a balanced budget. Dorset Council, having benefited from transformation savings, has been able to achieve this statutory requirement, without any cuts to front-line services, which makes us an outlier in the Southwest and compared to other unitary councils across the country.

## "the day-to-day stuff..."

Dorset Council has a growing reputation for, quote... "doing the day-to-day stuff well", such as waste and recycling, potholes, highway maintenance, grass cutting and streetlights etc, coupled with a strong focus on sound financial management supported by good governance oversight, underpinned by strong and constructive working relationships between elected members and officers. Testament to this, DEFRA has recently revealed that Dorset Council is the number one unitary authority in the UK for recycling, with rates topping 59% and with just 2% of waste going to landfill. An incredible achievement.

There is an excellent track record of achievement based on bold and ambitious policy making, coupled with clear aims and objectives, which is an excellent basis for optimism as we move into the next phase of transformation: continuing this good work and putting the needs and aspirations of Dorset residents first.

One of the other key ambitions is the preparation of our first Dorset Council Local Plan. The advent of the changes included in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act will enable the Local Plan to be based on a far more strategic approach. Key changes, such as the removal of the duty to co-operate and the 5-year land supply (provided the council has an up-to-date plan), will bring many benefits ensuring that the needs and aspirations of the people of Dorset can be met.

Dorset Council has been shortlisted for **COUNCIL OF THE YEAR 2024** which by any measure is a huge endorsement for the Conservative administration at County Hall.

"Dorset Council has been shortlisted for the 2024 LGC Awards as one of five finalists from across the country for the prestigious **Council of the Year** awards. This is a huge endorsement for the Conservative administration for the incredible achievements during the first five years as a Unitary Council. This national recognition follows on from the Conservative Leader being shortlisted for **Council Leader of the Year 2023**.

This along with the recent announcement by **DEFRA** which ranked **Dorset Council as the number 1 Unitary Council** for recycling at 59% which compares with a national average of 43%.

### **The Armed Forces Covenant as:**

"... an enduring Covenant between the people of the United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Government and all those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces and their families".

The Dorset Armed Forces Covenant Programme is a partnership between Dorset Council, Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole Council, Dorset HealthCare University Foundation Trust, NHS Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group, the Office of the Police, Crime Commissioner Dorset, Bournemouth University, Wessex RFCA, Royal British Legion, SSAFA, other relevant charities, the Military Bases, businesses, communities and individuals in a pledge of support between local residents and the Armed Forces Community in Dorset.

The Armed Forces Covenant sets out the relationship between the nation, the Government, and the Armed Forces. It recognises that the whole nation has a moral obligation to members of the Armed Forces and their families, and it establishes how they should expect to be treated. It considers the Armed Forces Community to include Regular Personnel, Reservists, Veterans, families of these and the bereaved.

The Government describes it as "an enduring Covenant between the people of the United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Government and all those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces of the Crown and their families".

The whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army, and the Royal Air Force, together with their families. They deserve our respect and support, and fair treatment.

## **How we support The Armed Forces Covenant**

Dorset is fortunate to have a two-year MoD Funded Programme that employs a Programme Co-ordinator who is responsible for the delivery of specific projects identified to support the Armed Forces community across the pan-Dorset area.

The overarching aim of the programme is to raise the profile of and to embed the Covenant in the day-to-day activities of all partner organisations across Dorset, ensuring that all members of the armed forces community are treated fairly and equitably.

## **Managing Debt**

The strain of increasing debt during the rising cost of living impacts many.

Dorset Citizens Advice can talk through the options for managing debt and help get things under control.

Visit Citizen Advice via the below button to find the local office or call the Dorset Adviceline on [0800 144 8848](tel:08001448848).

## **Local Transport Plan Consultation.**

A Reminder, Dorset Council and BCP Council are working together on options to move around Dorset safely, efficiently, and sustainably for years to come. This will be a joint plan, designed and managed by BCP and Dorset Councils using the results of a wide-reaching engagement survey. The Councils are listening to valuable feedback and not making any big decisions at this stage.

This joint plan will set out how transport is delivered to meet some of the demanding challenges facing the area, covering all types of transport, as well as road safety and maintenance. The new plan is needed to ensure we can travel safely and easily, whilst reducing carbon emissions and protecting the landscape that makes BCP and Dorset so special. All this must be done while maintaining economic growth and improving transport choices, accessibility, and experiences for all.

Since the last Local Transport Plan was produced in 2011, a lot has changed. Now is the chance to update our plans to ensure that our transport system meets the expectations of everyone and to identify the most important issues to prioritise future investment. The plan will be designed in line with the government's priorities, including the Net Zero by 2050 target.

The aim of this survey is to understand the different needs of the diverse communities who live and work in Dorset.

Recent research has helped us understand the wider transport related issues and opportunities for the future. We would now like to understand your views, so our new plan works for everyone.

This survey finishes on **Sunday 3 March 2024**.

If you cannot access the survey online an alternative format is available, please email, [ltp@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:ltp@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk) (Dorset Council), [ltp@bcpcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:ltp@bcpcouncil.gov.uk) (BCP Council) or call Dorset Council customer services 01305 221000 for a copy. This phone number is also suitable to use for BCP residents.

Any information collected will be stored in line with GDPR regulations and the Data Protection Act. Further information on our privacy notice can be found at [www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/your-council/about-your-council/data-protection/dorset-council-privacy-notice](http://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/your-council/about-your-council/data-protection/dorset-council-privacy-notice)

We are now halfway through the agricultural transition period in England and, as per the plan, basic payments are being progressively removed and environmentally focussed payments are being introduced.

This is alongside efforts to boost farm productivity to help improve their viability without direct support. The latest round of the Improving Farm Productivity grant has just opened and now funds solar PV installations alongside automation technology.

Developers and landowners can now progress Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) projects and credit purchases with more certainty as the government has announced the requirement's new implementation date in England.

### **Apply for an Improving Farm Productivity grant**

The second round of the Improving Farm Productivity grant is open for applications. The grant will now cover half the cost of certain robotic and automated equipment, increased from 40% in the last round. This year the scheme is also offering funding at a 25% rate for the installation of solar photovoltaic (PV) systems on farm building rooftops and over irrigation reservoirs.

The grant is part of the Farming Investment Fund and is open to farmers, growers, and related contractors. For robotic and automated equipment, the minimum grant available is £25,000 and the maximum grant available is £500,000. For solar equipment, the minimum grant available is £15,000 and the maximum grant available is £100,000.

Applicants can apply for robotics and solar equipment, but the combined grant amount cannot exceed £500,000. There is a two-step application process. Applicants must first go through the online checker before 21 March 2024. Those invited to make a full application then have until 30 June 2025 to do so.

### **The importance of rural shops**

Of the 49,399 convenience stores in the UK, more than a third (36%) are rural and half of those are the only business in the local area. The 2024 Rural Shop Report from the Association of Convenience Stores highlights how these rural shops play a key role in isolated rural communities. For example, 83% of independent rural retailers engaged in some form of community activity in the past year. Many also offer key services such as bill payment services (72%), free-to-use cash machines (49%) and community notice boards (48%). Savills forthcoming Spotlight on Social Value in the rural sector will explore the importance of community and social value in generating sustainable economic growth.

Best regards

Simon

Councillor Simon Christopher

The Dorset Councillor for the Marshwood Vale Ward

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