

# Cllr Christopher's E-mailed Report – 24 October 2022

I look forward to meeting with you on the morning of 25 October.

In this report I offer both my own reflections on matters and also provide the latest Leaders Report from Spencer Flower.

Clearly while the meeting time has changed for Chideock Parish Council, there continues to be a degree of political turmoil and not just for the Liberal Democrats losing another Councillor as a result of another defection

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Despite the failure of some politicians to concentrate on core issues so fostering stability , indeed certainty and a settled environment for growth there is still some good news around.

This includes the creation of the Rural England Prosperity Fund. The so-called REPF is worth £110 million. Despite what you may read on local social media the scheme covers two years, which does not start until April 2023 and will run until March 2025.

I must stress it is an important development but you may question whether this is sufficient funding to cover all the rural counties of England .It would however involve the creation of a fund dedicated to rural businesses and communities.

In conclusion this is a positive outcome after the publication of the All-Party Parliamentary Group report "Levelling Up the rural economy," and subsequent rural proofing report called "Delivering For Rural England."

Perhaps few people would disagree with the objectives mentioned in the above documents.

The 17 - 18 per cent gap between rural productivity and the higher urban productivity

Many of you will recall the work around the EU Structural Fund and LEADER and the Growth Development Fund commencing some 20 years ago. The Growth Development Fund targeted the underpinning of rural development. In Dorset Post foot and mouth in 2021 there was an active Chalk and Cheese , as it was called, Development group covering the deliverability of grants.

Now clearly there has been a post 2020 concern that as the Rural Development Programme for England Finished there was a situation where rural businesses were left with a lack of access to capital grants for the purpose of funding growth projects.

All in all, this is perhaps good news when coupled with policies to finally remove the divide between digital availability in rural and urban areas and establishing fit and proper rural transport infrastructure for those who both live and work in rural communities.

Turning now to social care, many of you will have noticed that the LGA i.e. The Local Government Association has called for some parts of the Governments adults social care reforms to be delayed to April 2024 The idea of delaying the implementation of the care cost cap etc is to allow authorities across the Country to learn from a pilot scheme. Clearly there are issues about the impact of who funds the reforms at a time of what is commonly called a social care workforce crisis. The chief proponent of the delay is Councillor David Feathergill of Somerset in his role as chair of the Community Wellbeing Board.

I set out the Leaders bulletin below and look forward to commenting on the statement of the Chancellor in post on 23 September

## **Leader's bulletin**

Welcome to the Leader's bulletin, following the Full Council meeting on Thursday 20 October 2022.

I wanted to bring you a few updates on:

- what support we're offering to help with the cost of living
- the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme
- our expressions of interest for Investment Zones
- our budget challenges

### Cost of Living Crisis

The council has brought together a network of officers and representatives from the community and voluntary sector to coordinate our response to the cost-of-living crisis. The network has been focusing on:

- Direct financial aid to households in greatest need
- Better access to housing services
- Urging people to act early
- Signposting to support on money (debts, benefits, budgeting), food, housing, and mental health

We have taken a data-led approach, using a cost-of-living dashboard, so we can target support for those people who are particularly at risk, such as older people on fixed state benefits, disabled people, and families with young children.

We are currently working on four workstreams for the autumn and winter:

1. Warm Welcome – working with Help & Kindness to map the existing community offer and identify opportunities for expanding community-led warm spaces and offer funding
2. Energy Efficiency - colleagues in Housing and Climate teams are looking at proposals to expand work to improve the energy efficiency of homes in Dorset
3. Food Security – working closely with foodbanks, social supermarkets, and other community food projects
4. Support to increase volunteering - working with the voluntary sector to promote volunteering and encourage more people to get involved in befriending and a range of activities to support vulnerable residents.

Round 4 of Dorset Council's Community and Culture Project Fund will be focused on supporting local community projects that help with the cost-of-living challenges. This fund opens for bids from voluntary and community groups on 4 November.

I'd like to thank our voluntary and community sector partners for the incredible work they are doing to support local people at this time.

Further information on support available to all is on our website: [dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/cost-of-living-help](https://dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/cost-of-living-help)

### Homes for Ukraine scheme

We are providing an additional winter payment of up to £1,000 to all Homes for Ukraine hosts, and a further £250 per month to hosts continuing to provide refuge for their guests after the initial six-month period.

Homes for Ukraine hosts have been receiving a £350 a month 'thank you' payment from the government since guests started to arrive in Dorset six months ago. The council has agreed to provide additional funds to further support these hosts who are able to continue to offer their homes to Ukrainian refugees.

You can find out more on our website [dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/refugee-programme-in-dorset](https://dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/refugee-programme-in-dorset)

### Investment Zones

Dorset Council has submitted Expressions of Interest for three potential Investment Zones: one around Weymouth harbour, one at Portland port, and one next to the existing Innovation Park in Winfrith.

It is understood that these new Investment Zones will accelerate development of infrastructure to drive economic growth by offering tax breaks for potential investors and simplified, reduced regulation and planning processes. The aim is to attract new investment to create jobs.

We don't yet know when the government will announce decisions on Expressions of Interest for Investment Zones.

We should welcome any opportunity to attract investment, improve infrastructure, and create jobs here in Dorset. The three proposed locations offer great potential for economic development and are suitable for this kind of activity.

However, our Expressions of Interest do not represent a commitment by government or by Dorset Council. We await further detail from government so we can assess the potential pros and cons of an Investment Zone before making any formal commitment following council processes.

Any opportunities should support and enhance the ambitions set out in the Dorset Council Plan and meet the economic development aspiration leading to improved social mobility, the latter being of particular concern to members across this chamber.

### **Budget challenge 2023/24**

Work has begun to set the budget for next financial year, 2023-24. Dorset Council is currently facing a £29 million budget gap next financial year. As we all know councils are required by law to set a balanced budget with expenditure balanced by income, so work will take place over the coming months to close this gap.

There are three main variables which affect the council's finances, and over which the council has little to no control:

- Dorset Council, like many households and businesses, is facing the challenge of inflation. Delivery of many services now costs more.
- Employee pay awards: the nationally agreed pay offer for next year alone is anticipated to cost this council an extra £6 million.
- Adult social care: demand continues to grow due to the aging population, with 30% of the population in Dorset who are 65+. The national average is 19%. Added to which are government reforms to adult social care coming in over the next year, costing significant sums of money to implement.

We face a high level of uncertainty over our budget position at this point in the year. It is not known what will happen with inflation over the coming months, so budget setting has to be based on forecasts. And the government's financial settlement to councils as usual will not be announced until the end of the year.

Dorset Council continues to be under-funded by government, but this is now exacerbated by inflation. We must work hard across the chamber through involvement in the scheduled Budget Cafés over the coming months to help in the setting of a balanced budget. This will almost certainly require some difficult decisions

We must all be acutely aware this comes at a time when people are increasingly struggling to make ends meet. Support for people who need it most will be prioritised and we're continuing to press our MPs and the new government for a better deal for our taxpayers.

Please note that I continue to press for what I will call a Trailway between Chideock and Bridport.

As members of the local Western Area Transport Action Group are aware, as was demonstrated at the October Dorset Cabinet meeting, I am a strong advocate for Public Transport and for the people of Chideock and look to discuss my experience of what has been achieved elsewhere . This needs to be considered in the light of an implantation date for a new Dorset Council Local Plan after May 2024 .

Best regards

Simon

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