

Cllr Christopher's E-mailed Report – 5 March 2023.

It is good to see so many community events in Chideock, I look forward to meeting with you on Tuesday.

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, and 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 lasting legacy through investment in energy efficiency of homes and support for children with early year education and starting school."

Public Health Dorset (PHD) launched a new children and young people's mental health campaign 'RUOK?' to coincide with Children's Mental Health Week. Recent research by Dorset Youth has shown that only 60% of Dorset young people know where to turn for mental health advice, so the campaign will address this by highlighting the wide range of mental health support available to children and young people in Dorset. This includes 24/7 crisis support from local and national helplines, NHS services in Dorset and support provided by local and national charities.

The campaign, produced on behalf of Dorset's Suicide Prevention Group, involves a wide range of partners including both councils, NHS Dorset, local NHS mental health services and the voluntary sector and has three areas of focus: A multi-channel communications campaign including news stories, social media and other content using real stories to highlight local and national support. A shareable graphic signposting to support that is easily accessible for young people which we're encouraging everyone to save on their phones and share with friends and loved ones and a targeted social media advertising campaign on Snapchat, Instagram and YouTube. If you would like to support the campaign or share with others in your community, you can use the following resources:

Draft Dorset Local Plan.

A summary of comments from the consultation of the draft Dorset Council Local Plan is now published.

All of the comments received from the 6,000 respondents have already been searchable on the council's website, but they have now been categorised against the draft policies and relevant areas of Dorset.

The consultation, which took place in early 2021, resulted in over 50,000 comments on the separate policies, more than all of the most recent former district and borough local plan consultations combined.

Cllr David Walsh, Dorset Council's Portfolio Holder for Planning, said:

"Officers have given time to every comment that was received during the consultation. We have been given specific details that will help us formulate the plan.

"We are grateful for everyone who has commented, there are many genuine issues which will be considered going forward."

The summary can be viewed on the Dorset Council website.

Although the timescale for the development of the Dorset Council Local Plan has been extended, evidence gathering has continued. This supporting evidence is also published on the council website.

The Dorset Council Local Plan will outline the strategy for

- Providing the growth Dorset needs
- Locating development in suitable places
- Providing community services including schools, retail, leisure, and community facilities
- Ensuring the appropriate character and quality of development
- Protecting the environment, and
- Acting on and adapting to the impacts of climate change.

Once adopted, the plan will guide decisions on planning applications in Dorset for the next sixteen years.

Second home report to be given extra opportunities for consideration.

The Dorset Council has taken the decision to defer their “Council tax premiums on second homes and empty properties” report to allow more councillors to be involved before a decision is made.

The report recommends that the Council should take advantage of flexibilities contained in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill which, if it becomes law, will enable the introduction of a 100% council tax premium on second homes.

Defra has announced plans for a new round of productivity grants, the government has also revealed new competitions for research and innovation, the opening of the Annual Health and Welfare Review, and plans for support for small abattoirs.

These follow the announcements made in January, which set out details for new Sustainable Farming Incentive standards and payment rates, plans for developing Countryside Stewardship, a new round of the Landscape Recovery scheme and additional funding for the Farming in Protected Landscape scheme.

The most recent announcement on productivity and slurry grants provides some short-term clarity on plans for 2023, and the first steps for the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway. The recent publication of new guidance for land managers on Biodiversity Net Gain will also provide welcome clarity on how to deliver biodiversity units for the private sector market.

The new grant announcements are welcome news for the industry, particularly those who have plans for new equipment. There is a total of £168m across a range of grants and competitions for research and innovation. In summary:

Round two of the Farm Equipment and Technology Fund (FETF) is open now for applications for productivity and slurry, with animal health and welfare grants opening in March

- The Annual Health and Welfare Review is now open for cattle, sheep and pigs
- New Water Management theme under the Farming Transformation Fund is opening in the spring and plans for future rounds on robotics and automation, and housing for calves
- Plans for new Farming Innovation Programme competitions for research and innovation

There is a lot of information on these schemes, but the key points for CLA members to focus on are:

Currently open:

- Farm Equipment and Technology Fund 2023 - Productivity and Slurry Annual Health and Welfare Review
 - Closing date for applications: 4 April 2023.
 - It is competitive.
 - Grants of £1,000-£25,000.
 - There is a list of eligible items.
 - It is open to farmers, forestry owners and contractors in England.

- Annual Health and Welfare Review
 - Funded annual vet-led visits for tailored advice and tests.
 - You need to register interest at gov.uk to be invited to apply.
 - Open to farmers with more than 11 beef or dairy cattle, 21 sheep or 51 pigs registered in England.

Opening in March

- Farming Equipment and Technology fund 2023 – Animal Health and Welfare
 - The closing date is to be confirmed.
 - It is competitive - £20m available.
 - There are grants of £1,000 - £25,000.
 - The aim of this fund is to improve the health and welfare of livestock, such as handling, biosecurity, automated monitoring, etc.
 - Opening later in 2023

- New rounds of Farming Transformation Fund

Expected themes:

- Water Management - grants for reservoirs and improving irrigation
 - Automation and robotics - grants for investment in technology
 - Livestock - grants for upgrades or new housing for calves
 - Grants vary but typically £25,000-£500,000 depending on the theme.
 - It is competitive.
- Support for small abattoirs
Funding to help abattoirs invest in new technology, improve productivity and enhance animal health and welfare.
Details are still being developed.

In addition, applications for Countryside Stewardship schemes to start in January 2024 are open now, and we expect applications for SFI 2023 standards to open in the summer. The England Woodland Creation Offer is also available for applications.

Best regards

Simon

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