

Dorset Council Report

March 2020

Dorset Council will mark its first anniversary on 1st of April. For elected members these first months have sometimes felt like wading through treacle, while for some staff it must have felt like a relentless tsunami of change, but it is fair to say that enormous progress has been made. A new Senior Management Team now leads a new staffing structure, with newly appointed Heads of Service across the board. New committees are hard at work, advised by new cross-party panels looking at every aspect of the Council's work. Teams are reviewing assets, contracts, policies and relationships with the community. The budget for 2020/21 sets tough efficiency challenges to all departments.

But we are still only in the foothills of the mountain of change which we will have to scale if we are to achieve the full potential of reorganisation. Investment will be needed in IT, staff training and much more. And we can only guess what investment our declared Climate and Ecological Emergency might require in future years.

Yet, despite the challenges, I remain optimistic that Dorset Council can become an excellent authority, living within its means, before too long.

Coronavirus

Dorset Council is aware of the possible issues for local services should the coronavirus spread to Dorset in significant numbers. At the moment the level of risk is set at low to moderate. For the time being it is business as usual and the Council is advising service providers to follow the advice issued by Public Health England and the NHS. Anyone with health concerns should call 111 rather than attending their GP surgery or hospital.

Flooding

At the time of writing there are a number of flood alerts live in the ward. And we are not done yet with the high winds. Local communities are very experienced at monitoring and managing local flood events and our Flood Warden's local knowledge is invaluable. However, Dorset Council is there to help in emergency. Fallen trees are the responsibility of the landowner who should arrange for the trees to be made safe. Blocked roads should be notified to the local police in the first instance. Once the storms are over Parish Councils may want to inspect for damage to roads and notify the Community Highways Officer of work needed.

Council Budget 2020/21

Council Tax will increase by just under 4% in April to help fund the rising cost of Adult Social Care and Children's Services. Demand in both these service areas continues to rise across the country, and given Dorset's population profile, we expect this to continue into future years. We are determined not to cut other services, so it is essential to get the Council working more cost effectively.

Since its creation last year Dorset Council has achieved £17m of efficiency savings and further savings are due this year. All parts of the Council are focused on transforming how services are managed and delivered with the aim of providing improved services for less cost. These changes cannot all be achieved at once, some may involve changes to contracts or disposing of property, and we need to look at best practice in other councils, but the pressure will remain on to reduce costs while maintaining service.

As advocates for Dorset, we lobby government for fairer funding for rural counties and, as my report shows, we grab such extra funding as we can.

Dorset Council Plan 2020-2024

The new Dorset Council Plan sets out the priorities which will guide the work of the Council for the coming years. In particular, it informed the budget setting process for expenditure in 2020-21. The draft plan was widely discussed and represents the views of people and communities across Dorset. The published plan can be seen on the website.

Highways

Dorset Council will continue with its programme of planned road repairs using micro-surfacing, surface dressing, premium surface dressing and resurfacing methods, depending on the nature of the repair. Some roads are patched six months before, to prepare them for the permanent repair. Micro-surfacing is a cost-effective treatment for worn but structurally sound roads. It keeps road closures to a minimum, usually overnight.

Many roads are in need of repair across the county, and this very wet winter will have taken its toll, particularly on smaller roads. As always, priority will be given to the most heavily used roads and those with safety risks. The way to get your roads into the repairs programme is through the Community Highways Officer, who will inspect the road and make a report.

Climate and Ecological Emergency

Steady progress is being made by the Dorset Council Panel looking at how the Council should address the climate emergency. The Council's approach is to involve as many people as possible in this debate and to listen and learn before coming to a view. As part of this we issued a "Call for Ideas" to enable all residents and businesses to suggest what they would like to see the Council do and held an Inquiry Day to which people were invited to speak about their ideas on climate change. A report will be published shortly.

The Dorset Council Plan demonstrates the extent to which climate change will affect the way we operate and deliver services in the future.

Government Funding for 5G Dorset

A bid, led by Dorset Council, has secured funding of £4.335m to investigate how 5G mobile connectivity could help rural communities. The Dorset project is one of seven across the country designed to see if the next generation mobile connectivity can be rolled out differently to provide greater support to rural communities. The total cost of the Dorset project is £6.675m, with Dorset Council contributing £150,000 and the rest coming from government and industry.

Four trials will look at next generation connectivity in Agri-tech; for the Dorset Innovation Park at Winfrith; for improved safety for first responders along the coast and for tourism on the Lulworth Estate.

This project will not immediately address the pockets of very poor 4G mobile coverage, which remain the responsibility of the mobile providers.

Government Funding for Vulnerable Residents

The Council has been awarded £500,000 of government funding to help reduce the number of rough sleepers across the county. Rough sleeping increased in North Dorset during 2019. The money will enable the Council's Housing Team to extend their work to help get people off the streets and into accommodation.

A further grant of £1m has been awarded to tackle domestic violence across Dorset and Hampshire. Dorset's share of the funding will fund the Dragonfly Project which helps keep people subject to domestic abuse safe.

Keeping in Touch

The next edition of the Council's newsletter, *Dorset Council News*, will be published shortly. With it will be a survey asking whether it is useful, to help us decide whether to continue to produce it.

The best way of contacting Dorset Council is the website, dorsetcouncil.gov