**DORSET COUNCILLORS REPORT FOR VALE OF ALLEN P C**

**WEDNESDAY 28th JULY 2021**

**COVID-19**

**Dorset Council prepares for step 4 of the COVID roadmap**

Dorset Council has put plans in place in response to the lifting of remaining legal restrictions relating to the COVID pandemic by the Government from last Monday 19 July.

All council services are now operating fully. The vast majority of these services continued to operate throughout the pandemic, with appropriate COVID restrictions in place. In light of the current rising COVID rate locally, the decision has been made to retain a number of COVID measures for the ongoing protection of customers and staff. Council staff in customer-facing roles will be strongly encouraged to continue wearing face coverings, as will customers visiting indoor premises. Plexiglass safety screens will remain in place in customer-facing settings, and hygiene and cleaning regimes will continue.

Throughout the pandemic, many council employees have continued to deliver their roles working within local communities, providing vital services such as highways maintenance, social work, and waste collection. This work will of course continue from 19 July. A limited number of council staff have been working from council offices throughout the pandemic, with strict COVID-secure measures in place. From 19 July, those council employees who have been working from home will continue to do so where they are able to, and any future wider return to office working will be cautious and gradual. Working arrangements have been discussed extensively with employees to ensure that staff needs as well as customer needs are met.

Over the coming months, Dorset Council will be moving to hybrid working arrangements for many staff on a permanent basis, allowing employees to work from a range of locations including out in the community, from home and from a number of office buildings and other workplaces.

Help on a range of issues relating to COVID-19, including support for people who are clinically extremely vulnerable or those who need to self-isolate, can be found online www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/coronavirus or by calling 01305 221000.

**Council meetings**

Plans were in place for Dorset Council meetings to revert to normal from 19th July, but in the light of the increasing Covid-19 case rates locally and the projected increases through August and into September, in consultation with group leaders, the Chief Executive has exercised his emergency powers to revert to informal virtual meetings. For this meeting where a decision is required it is delegated to the most appropriate officer to make the decision, having listened to and taken into account the views expressed by the wider Committee membership.

**And a personal view**

July 19th - so called ‘Freedom Day’ has happened and some of us we will probably be unsure, and possibly concerned, about the impact the lifting of the remaining restrictions in England will have on Covid infections. I have enquired around a selection of businesses locally and it appears that most seem to be taking a cautious approach by requesting that customers and visitors wear masks while on their premises, and existing hygiene measures such as hand gel etc. remain in place for some time yet.

I don’t think anyone wants a government to micro-manage their lives, and the situation now means we need to take back a greater share of personal responsibility. I dislike wearing a mask intensely but will continue to do so in certain situations out of courtesy to others.

**Customer service points now open to the public.**

Since March 2020, due to COVID-19, many more people have been accessing services through the council’s website or by telephone.

From 5th July support with council services is now available face to face. For us locally, contact points are at Wimborne library and Nordon Lodge, Blandford. Customer services can assist with council enquiries or urgent needs that cannot be supported over the phone or online. For many residents in my ward this is their preferred method, and the new customer service points are to be welcomed.

The continued safety of customers and employees is paramount. There will be pre-booked appointments only unless an enquiry requires support due to its complexity or the vulnerability of the person concerned. All locations will follow the latest COVID-19 guidelines and social distancing measures to ensure customers are kept safe.

Customers can contact Dorset Council from anywhere in Dorset, Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 5pm by calling Dorset Direct on 01305 221000 (out of hours service operates outside this time), email customerservices@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk or via the website [www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk](http://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk) and in public access computers are available for use in all of our [libraries](https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/libraries-history-culture/libraries/libraries.aspx).

**Dorset Local Plan**

The Dorset Council Local Plan contains strategies to shape the area over a 17-year period. These include planning growth in the right places at the right time, maximising the supporting infrastructure secured through development, boosting the local economy, and protecting the high-quality local environment. Without a plan, and an ability to show that it has a five-year supply of land for development, the council is open to challenge from developers who would then be able to build homes in unplanned locations potentially harming our high quality environment.

During the pandemic the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) gave guidance that local councils should not delay the production of their Local Plans. Dorset Council took on board this guidance and used a mixture of online and traditional methods to promote the consultation on the Dorset Council Local Plan to make sure that a representative sample of the population responded to the questionnaire.

This first version generated mostly constructive comments in the community. Surprising in a way, as this part of the county has borne the brunt of new development since the former East Dorset District Council plan was adopted in 2014, so the prospect of yet more could be an anathema to some. Throughout the process I encouraged individuals to respond and will continue to do so as future iterations of the plan evolve.

The consultation has been scrutinised by a working group of elected councillors making sure that the project keeps to its objectives. The Executive Advisory Panel (EAP) as it is known is supported by officers and is tasked by Dorset Council’s Cabinet to focus on areas of work to make sure that it is carried out according to the council’s priorities. Any recommendations that the panel make have to be agreed by the Cabinet.

There were over 60,000 comments via the online form, posted paper copies or by email, with around 7,000 residents responding, and a good cross section with age range from 11 to 85 years old. All the comments are being considered within the framework set by the National Planning Policy which informs all planning decisions.

The Leader of the Council joined others from across the country recently to discuss the issues relating to the Government’s proposed planning reforms and the potential impact on Dorset. It was a very productive meeting with open and frank discussions regarding some of the proposed changes and how best to find a suitable balance between housing need and the safeguarding of our unique environment in the county of Dorset

**Update on B3087 works at Stanbridge**

I note the item on the agenda requesting an update. Dorset Council are currently planning on the works starting during August – no set date as yet as we are awaiting an ecological survey ahead of vegetation clearance and the date is also subject to weather conditions and also completion of the legal agreement with the owner.

The works are planned to take six to eight weeks but would again be subject to weather conditions.

Works are likely to be carried out under the current temporary traffic signals, but there may be a necessity for a road closure at some point during the works.

**Wimborne Market**

Probably many of you have been, or indeed still are, users of it I thought you would appreciate an update on the situation with the future of Wimborne Market which has made the news over the last few months.

McCarthy and Stone put in a planning application for a ‘Retirement Village’ comprising of 66 age restricted apartments, 26 age restricted bungalows, 6 age restricted chalet bungalows, one wellness centre, 9 open market houses, parking, highway improvements and pedestrian link. This initial application has been refused and whether it comes back to the table remains to be seen.

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**Cllr Robin Cook 28th July 2021**