**DORSET COUNCILLORS REPORT FOR VALE OF ALLEN - HINTON WARD**

 **ANNUAL MEETING – WEDNESDAY 11th MAY 2022**

Good evening to all.

I am pleased to present an annual report as your ward member. This will be a first from Dorset Council which came into being in April 2019.

Since your last annual meeting who knew just then what lay ahead for the world with first a pandemic declared in early 2020, the effects of which are still very much with us, and now a war in Europe.

For Dorset Council the pandemic presented a major challenge on how to continue providing essential services throughout lockdown particularly with numbers of our own staff absent due to COVID. In addition we needed to support our communities with the challenges they faced, focusing on the vulnerable as a priority. Our staff worked tirelessly throughout that time, and I personally received many positive comments from residents to say how much they appreciated the help given.

From a councillors perspective we were also no more immune from the effects than anyone and some of us were shielding and unable to be ‘on the ground’ in a way that they would normally conduct their business, but there was a plus side. This was the introduction of ‘virtual’ meetings which enabled all of us to continue the business of local government. This was an ideal opportunity for us to be part of meetings and business that, in normal times, we would or could not be because of time or location restraints. Whilst ‘talking heads’ on a screen is not ideal it was a means to an end and will stay with us in a hybrid format which will make the democratic process more accessible for a much wider audience.

In this report I have tried to focus on the points from the year that I think affect this parish and are probably of the most interest.

**Dorset Local Plan**

The draft Dorset local plan started public consultation from 18th January 2021 and ran for 8 weeks till 15th March. There were a number of methods that were used to inform, consult, and involve others such as: Publicising consultations through press releases, our website, public notices in the local press, posters, leaflets, and social media, plus emailing or writing to appropriate organisations, community groups and individuals directly.

Consultation documents were available on the Dorset Council website and at local libraries for click and collect or other public locations, as deemed appropriate, where possible and Covid safe. There were displays in windows of empty shops and Tourist Information Centres in some town centres. There was also a phone line that people could call to ask questions.

In addition to all the above, webinars where everyone was welcome to attend and ask questions were held.

All of this produced a tremendous response with more than 9000 responses with over 60,000 comments. I held a various virtual sessions with residents groups and the parish councils across the ward, and there was a lot of constructive feedback from those.

The target date for production of the plan is 2023 which is a very tight time frame for such a huge piece of work, and following detailed examination of those consultation responses, the council leader Cllr Spencer Flower has written to Michael Gove asking him to consider several radical alternatives. I have highlighted these below.

* allow Dorset to pilot a radically different approach to Local Plan making
* break the link between the housing land supply numbers and the Duty to Cooperate – i.e. the requirement for Dorset Council to accept unmet housing need from neighbouring councils
* allow Dorset an extension of two years until April 2026 to give more time for the new Dorset Local Plan to be developed and approved. During this extended period of plan preparation, Dorset should be protected against speculative housing development by suspending the five-year land supply requirement or by other means necessary
* fully recognise the [climate and ecological emergency](https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/emergencies-severe-weather/climate-emergency/climate-ecological-emergency-strategy/the-climate-and-ecological-emergency-strategy) in the planning system, including new building regulations.

This was acknowledged and Cllr Flower had a meeting with Michael Gove in early March. It was a useful and productive meeting at which we were invited to set out the challenges and asks from Dorset Council. The following key areas were discussed

* a two year extension for an adopted plan until April 2026
* protection against inappropriate development by allowing a change to the 5 year land supply requirement during the extended period
* changes to the Duty to Co-operate

Following this meeting there have been discussions with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Chief Planning Officer about the ambitions for Dorset and our wish to include a new settlement into the initial Dorset Local Plan. We are very encouraged by the positive attitude and willingness to listen to our suggestions and out offer to be a pilot for any new approach to local plan making.

Arrangements have been made for a further meeting and a progress report will come to our full council in July.

This action does acknowledge the extent of feeling about the future of housing provision in Dorset. Publication of the revised draft plan will be later this year and will go out for further consultation.

**Planning service**

I think it goes without saying that, since the formation of the unitary council, the planning service has had a bumpy ride and the service was not performing well. This was due in part to the pandemic which, because of the working from home rules, made the planning officers job challenging. In addition, during the COVID crisis the number of planning applications went through the roof as so many people decided they wanted to expand their home due partly to the rise in home working, the difficulties around house selling and buying and the need for more living space around them.

This was exacerbated by the need to converge the systems from the previous five district and borough councils which is a very complex operation. That work is now almost complete, and together with additional resources, the system is working much more efficiently and much of the backlog and delays which were so frustrating for all of us have been reduced.

**Council budget**

The strain on council finances during the pandemic was huge and we were looking at an eyewatering deficit at one stage during that period. However some government money combined with prudent financial management meant we were able to maintain our services, albeit with a slightly limited offer for some periods.

I am pleased to say that for the coming financial year 2022/23 we have produced a balanced budget and the headlines for that are

* **adult social care** – a 10% increase (equating to £13 million, taking the total budget to £141 million) to fund the rising need for social care in the local population and rising costs

**\*note**: Social Care takes 59% of our total budget.

* **children’s services** – a 4% increase (equating to £2.7 million, taking the total budget to £74.5 million) to fund improvements to support children in care and children with special educational needs and disabilities
* **climate and ecological emergency response –** £10M capital investment over the next 5 years to help fund the delivery of the council’s action plan
* **housing** – an extra £0.75 million to support the development of more new homes with our Registered Providers and the supply of better value temporary accommodation from the private rented sector.

**Highways**

I am very conscious about highway concerns around the ward, in particular within the Vale of Allen parish. Areas of the parish suffer particularly from the overspill of traffic particularly from the more urban areas of Wimborne and Colehill and the detrimental effect this has on our rural roads. This in turn affects the quality of life. This is recognised as an important issue by our highways teams. The parish council has been actively seeking urgent attention to this and is currently working closely with officers seeking solutions. Some of what is being asked is a long way off, if it ever happens, but there will be some quick wins that will come out of this I am certain.

I fully support your parish council in their endeavours to improve things, and they have certainly highlighted this subject with the decision makers and moved it higher up the agenda within Dorset Council.

There is so much more I could report on, here I have only just scratched the surface, but tried to give you a flavour of the things that I get most queries about from residents. If you have a particular issue about the above or any other council related business then please do contact me, details below. Sadly it is not always possible to give you the answer you want to hear, but you will always get an answer from me.

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