

Dorset Council, West Purbeck, March 2020 Report

Meeting with MPs

The Leader, myself and the Chief Executive recently held a meeting with our MPS to discuss common issues. The MPs were Simon Hoare, Michael Tomlinson, Chris Loder and Richard Drax. We have agreed to meet regularly to ensure that we can resolve any local questions and for them to understand where we need their help. We also provided them with an update on our financial situation and the shape of our forthcoming budget. We also made the following points

Dorset is a very beautiful county, but it suffers from some very significant challenges. Dorset South Constituency has the lowest levels of Social Mobility of any Constituency in England, and Weymouth has some of the highest levels of deprivation nationally. There are also significant pockets of deprivation in other parts of Dorset, exacerbated by areas of significant rural sparsity across the county. Some comparative funding issues are:

- By any measure the South West fares poorly in terms of transport investment, which exacerbates the challenges presented by our rurality.
- The South West also receives substantially less investment than the South East on enterprise and economic development, transport, and housing and community amenities.
- Coastal areas are increasingly associated with lower pay, lower life expectancy and deprivation
- Dorset receives far less per pupil (under the pupil premium calculation) than inner city areas, but has levels of need, deprivation and challenge of the same relevant magnitude. This situation is replicated across other services.
- Current modelling suggests that numbers of Looked after Children (LAC) could increase from 427 to 510 which would create an additional pressure of £3.6m per annum of unfunded costs to the council budget.
- Numbers of Education Health Care Plans (EHCP) have increased by over 67% since January 2015 but the funding from central government has only increased by 7%.

Budget

Further to the article in last month's magazine. Council tax contributions for Dorset Council are proposed to increase by just under 4% to help to fund the rising costs of adult social care and children's services protecting the most vulnerable people in society.

We are legally required to provide social care, and these services are often expensive to provide. Well over half of our total budget is spent on adults' and children's social care. Since 2010, central government grants to councils have been cut by nearly 60%. We no longer receive any Revenue Support Grant from central Government. Instead, the Government expects us to raise the funding we need through council tax.

This is why 2% of the increase in council tax is what is known as a 'social care precept' – in other words, central Government is encouraging councils to increase council tax specifically in order to fund the growing cost of social care. Councillors will vote on this proposal at the Full Council meeting on 18 February.

Town and Parish Councils

We are holding workshops with Councils as part of the dialogue between Dorset Council (DC) and Town & Parish Councils (T&PCs), to discuss how we can build a new relationship and work together in future for mutual benefit and, more importantly, for the benefit of Dorset communities. Below is some feedback

- The approach by DC to work with T&PCs to build a new working relationship was widely welcomed.
- T&PCs wanted greater details of how a new relationship with DC and T&PCs would work in practice.
- Most agreed that DC and T&PCs have a shared objective of providing community leadership to meet the needs of local people as well a shared appetite to work together better to achieve this jointly.
- A strong theme was that Dorset Council needs to work hard to build trust with T&PCs by:
 - Listening to town & parish councils
 - Involving them in decision-making at the earliest opportunity
 - Acting on their feedback wherever possible, and where it isn't possible explaining why
 - Improving two-way communications.
- DC perceived by some as 'monolithic' and 'remote'.
- DC needs to develop open and improved communications with T&PCs. For example, DC need to involve T&PCs as early as possible in any potential changes or cuts to services so they can prepare properly. Officers need to explain their decisions and processes better to local councils.
- There's a question over resources. DC and T&PCs all face significant pressures on budgets and resources. Sometimes DC does things which can inadvertently put additional pressure on town and parish councils. DC needs to explain better the constraints on its resources to T&PCs.
- T&PCs are asking for a special relationship with DC where their queries and requests are treated as a higher priority than those from members of public. T&PCs see themselves as the voice of their communities, representing local needs, so would like DC to prioritise ("fast-track") their requests.
- Role of clerks: we need to recognise that DC may inadvertently be putting pressure on clerks, and we need better understanding the role of clerks in our communications T&PCs.

- There has been much praise for community Highways Officers - these are named individual officers with direct relationships with local councils.
- DC recognises the varying sizes and complexity of different parish and town councils. We will need different approaches to working together to meet the needs of different councils.
- People have fed back that they liked the workshops and felt DC had productive conversations but will reserve judgement until they see what happens next: DC now needs to act on feedback.

The next steps will be for Dorset Council to work up some proposals and items for discussion with town & parish councils in response to the feedback. These will be discussed at a second series of workshops to be held in the coming months.

Surgery

We frequently and happily hold meetings with our constituents at a time and place that is mutually convenient to one or other of us. We will respond to any email or telephone request to meet which we will hold either at a local village hall, hostelry or at your home to suit you. Please ring or email us with the subject matter so that we can prepare ourselves. Peter's email address is peterwharf@hotmail.com telephone 07986600799 and Laura's is cllrlaura.miller@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk telephone 07814 569563.

Peter Wharf & Laura Miller, Dorset Councillors for West Purbeck