

Dorset Council, West Purbeck, July 2020 Report

Letter to the Prime Minister

The letter below was sent to the Prime Minister by the Leader of Dorset Council on June 1st on behalf of all of us; as of 15th June we have not had a reply.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister
House of Commons
Westminster
SW1A 0AA

Date: 1 June 2020

Ref:

✉ cllrspencer.flower@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Dear Prime Minister

As Leader of Dorset Council, I am writing to you to express my serious concern about the disproportionate and negative impact the Guidance states to “travel to outdoor open space irrespective of distance” is having on areas like Dorset which are popular with visitors. Dorset is within a single day’s travelling distance for visitors from London and the Midlands.

Over the past weekend we have seen some extremely disappointing behaviour from visitors to Dorset’s beaches. The incidents at Durdle Door on Saturday 30 May placed a huge strain on our emergency services. There have also been issues in other popular destinations across the county with excessive numbers of visitors not being able to observe social distancing. We’ve seen littering, people urinating and defecating in public, people camping overnight and people having dangerous campfires and BBQs – despite extensive warnings against this from all local agencies. Council employees have been abused by members of the public as they tried to manage the traffic.

I am acutely aware of how worried and upset many Dorset residents feel about the current situation, particularly when so many of them have complied fully with lockdown guidance, particularly, when the Dorset Council area had one of the lowest COVID19 infection rates in the country.

My overriding priority throughout the COVID19 outbreak has been the safety and wellbeing of Dorset residents, and all decision making has been based on this. We at Dorset Council have done everything we can within the limited powers we have, to prepare for and respond to the situation. For several weeks now we’ve been sending out a strong message that potential visitors should ‘think twice’ about coming to Dorset.

However, since you announced on Sunday 10 May that lockdown was to be gradually eased and that people can “travel to outdoor open space irrespective of distance” and “you can sit on a beach”, both we and Dorset Police have had very limited powers of enforcement. For example, since the recent guidance came into effect, the Police have no longer been able to challenge road users as to whether their journeys are essential. In other words, we have limited ability to deal with the large visitor numbers and issues like the lack of social distancing and the negative impact on local communities.

Ahead of this announcement there was no communication with local councils about how we might manage this influx, including the need for car parking, public toilets and most importantly for beaches, the provision of Lifeguards. I understand that concern was being raised by Ministers last week about the lack of Lifeguards – surely this is a conversation that should have happened before your announcement?

All our public services are very stretched due to weeks of responding to the COVID19 outbreak and other major incidents such as the wildfire at Wareham Forest. My plea to the government is to review the travel advice currently in place and instead ask people to “stay local”. I am concerned that we will see a second wave of infection here in Dorset as a result of the high number of visitors to the area over recent days. I’m asking the government to act now to save the lives of Dorset residents. Please help us to help them by issuing a revised guidance telling people to stay local for the time being.

We stand ready and waiting to work with the government but in order to do so, you need to engage far more closely with the local government sector to deliver the results we need for the country at this time.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Spencer Flower
Leader

cc: Richard Drax MP
Michael Tomlinson MP
Simon Hoare MP
Chris Loader MP
Sir Christopher Chope MP

Test and Trace

Local authorities in the South West have been allocated over £22million to support the new Test and Trace service, as part of a £300million package for England. The funding will help communities to progress plans to reduce the spread of coronavirus in their area, building on the continued efforts to respond to the pandemic locally.

A total of £22,669,395 has been allocated to the 14 county councils/unitary authorities in the South West of which Dorset received £1,287,650.

This is the government announcement...

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/local-authorities-across-england-receive-funding-to-support-new-test-and-trace-service>

All the allocations can be found here...

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-test-and-trace-service-support-grant/local-authority-test-and-trace-service-support-grant-allocations>

Dorset Council's SEND Local Offer

Dorset Council's Local Offer for children and young people from 0 to 25 years with special educational needs and/or disability (SEND) provides information, advice and support for children and their families is outlined in the link below.

<https://dorsetcouncil.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=c39535cf4f9d1ca66af8d2b44&id=49a54e35b7&e=16edcd53e6>

Bus Passes

Dorset Council (DC) and bus operators had suspended the normal conditions for holders of an older persons' or disabled persons' bus pass in March, so that people were able to get to supermarkets that were opening early for the elderly and those 'at risk' of catching the coronavirus. On Monday (15 June), the terms and conditions for these bus passes was reinstated to those that were in place before lockdown. This is to coincide with businesses and shops reopening and the resulting increase in people using public transport before 9.30am. People who are vulnerable to catching coronavirus due to age or underlying conditions will want to avoid these busy times.

Over £100m paid to Dorset businesses in grants

The Revenues and Benefits team in Dorset Council recently achieved a major milestone with the payment of over £100M to local businesses. This is a huge achievement and has provided a vital lifeline to support the local economy during this challenging time. This was a completely unprecedented job for Revenues and Benefits, and something that's been done on top of 'business as usual'.

Local outbreak management plans

Dorset Council (DC) now have to develop local outbreak management plans by the end of June and have now received £1.3m to the Public Health budget from government for this work. The plans will set out in detail how we will respond to potential local outbreaks, including care homes and schools, high risk settings (hostels, workplaces with particular risks), testing and tracing, intelligence and surveillance, and ensuring adequate local skills and capacity to respond. The plan will be delivered through a local COVID19 outbreak board, overseen by a public engagement board with local political leadership. DC will use the Health & Wellbeing Board to undertake this role. The plans will ensure we remain vigilant for any changes in local COVID-19 transmission, and that we have local ability to respond quickly to any outbreaks, working with our partners.

Redeploying staff to other teams through COVID-19

The current COVID 19 crisis has seen almost 250 Dorset Council employees take up temporary new roles to support frontline services. From delivering essential supplies and supporting registration services to helping Household Recycling Centres and contacting those who were shielding, the employees have made a big difference. They have temporarily left their non-critical roles to provide support where it is currently most needed.

As soon as the crisis hit, the council identified its critical services and matched employees working in lower priority services to provide much needed cover – to either deal with increasing demand or fill in for colleagues who were shielding.

All employees were invited to complete a questionnaire so the best use could be made of their skills. Once they were matched with a suitable role, an induction to their new place of work was provided, including training to help them do their new role. These colleagues have made a great impact, and they have learnt the ropes incredibly quickly during this unprecedented time. The crisis has meant everyone has drawn on a determination to succeed and the council has been able to flex its resources to meet demands never seen before. I am confident this sharing of skills, together with a practical approach will stand us in good stead for the future.

Virtual Council Meetings

Dispensation has been sought and granted for councillors who are be unable to attend Dorset Council meetings in person during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Currently the majority of meetings are continuing “virtually” and the council has reduced or suspended some meetings. The dispensation for Dorset councillors was agreed at an extraordinary annual meeting on Thursday 11 June. The dispensation will remain in force up to 6 May 2021. This dispensation means that Councillors can not be disbarred through no fault of their own because of physical non-attendance at meetings. The council has suspended face-to-face meetings since the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions. New regulations enable decision-making processes to continue in accordance with the Government’s guidance on the use of virtual meetings and social distancing where this is not possible.

A web page on the Dorset Council website details all the meetings being held virtually. This includes links to agendas and how to access the meetings live and information about how to submit questions to meetings. Recorded meetings are also available to watch after they have ended.

Highways work

As you are probably already aware, Highways construction sites were closed and programmes of planned repairs paused on Monday 23 March, when social distancing measures were introduced by the Government. We now have clearance to continue to deliver our planned capital schemes where it is safe to do so. We are currently revising all of our risk assessments and method statements to ensure we can take into account the latest Public Health England guidance and adapting our approach to delivering work to ensure it only continues where safe to do so.

Dorset Highways has also supported other Dorset Council services through this period, with staff involved in delivering food to the most vulnerable, supporting the NHS in pharmacy deliveries, providing drivers for Dorset Waste Partnership and managing the distribution of PPE to agencies operating in the health and care sector.

Surfacing Programme

The Dorset Highways surfacing programme comprises of sites identified due to their deteriorating condition and the risk they pose to the safe movement of essential goods and services. In collaboration with our private sector partner Hanson Contracting, we have developed new ways of

working that will allow us to deliver this essential maintenance programme without putting our workforce or the wider public at risk. Taking all of this into account, DC have had to completely change their programme to focus on the sites most in need of maintenance. This may mean that some communities may have to wait slightly longer than they expected before seeing roads in their area resurfaced. Up to date information on planned road works across the Dorset area can be found at www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/roadworks or by following @TravelDorset on Twitter.

Surface Treatments

This programme of work includes surface dressing, micro-asphalt and footway slurry seal. Surface treatments are traditionally applied during the summer as they are very dependent on weather conditions. As they are preventative treatments aimed at extending the life of an asset, we only have a limited window of opportunity to apply them before it needs a deeper, more costly repair. With this in mind, we are working hard to not miss this year's window if at all possible. Unfortunately, it was not possible, during lockdown, to treat all roads in an urban/residential setting due to the increase in parked vehicles and the likely increased contact with pedestrians.

Highways Improvement Schemes

Dorset Council made the decision to suspend all schemes that were under construction and pause any that were planned to start in April and May. Live sites were made safe and traffic management reduced to a minimum over this period. After reviewing the latest guidance from Public Health England, we have managed to produce Safe Working Procedures that have allowed all sites to restart.

Routine Maintenance

DC's current focus is on completing essential safety inspections and repairs to the highest priority parts of our network. This process has been adjusted to reflect social distancing measures but still ensures the network remains safe for the movement of essential goods and services. The teams continue to identify and repair the defects that pose the greatest risk to the travelling public. This focus will mean that some of the lower risk activities, such as ditch cutting and grip clearing, will take longer to deliver than usual. I am sure that our residents can recognise the rationale behind these decisions, however, rest assured that DC will carry out this work as soon as they can.

Highways - Other Works Promoters

We continue to assess permit applications and road closure requests throughout this time, from all works promoters, and are continuing to monitor works to ensure that they are being executed safely and in accordance with government guidelines. Most works promoters have been focusing on urgent works to their infrastructure at this time to ensure disruption to their services are minimal. We have been challenging works promoters to ensure that strategic routes are kept free flowing, where possible, and works on roads leading to hospitals and supermarkets are avoided/carefully managed to ensure minimal disruption to key worker journeys. With the decreased traffic flows, we have taken the opportunity to permit works on some routes that would usually be traffic sensitive. This will avoid disruption in the future when more vehicles return to the network. We are also liaising with works promoters and event organisers to carefully coordinate the rescheduling of postponed roadworks and events that were planned to take place, while taking into account future economic demands

New Coronavirus helpline for parents and carers

We have set-up the helpline to support those who are worried about their child or teenager during the lockdown. If you are concerned about how your child is managing and you need someone to talk to, please ring us. Our educational psychologists are available to help you. They will listen to your concerns and can offer practical advice and guidance. The helpline number is: 01305 228300. It is open from Monday to Friday from 9am to 4.45pm. Callers need to ring and make an appointment for a 30 minute phone consultation.

Helpline for vulnerable people open over the weekend

Our helpline for vulnerable people (01305 221000) is open from 8am to 8pm, 7 days a week. It was interesting to note that the amount of calls we receive at the weekend is significantly lower than weekdays. If you could help us spread the word to anyone you know who might need help or support, that would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.

Surgery

We are not holding face to face meetings now. However, we would be delighted to ring and talk to 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