

Dorset Council, West Purbeck, June 2020 Report

Coronavirus

We remain very much in the front line of this programme implementing a variety of government initiatives and schemes and the situation is very fluid, changing daily. So, as I said last month, I am loathe to write a report that may well be out of date by the time it appears in print! I continue writing progress reports every few days to Parish Council clerks and others, leaving them to forward as appropriate. The community shield work is continuing to help and support the most vulnerable people of all ages across the county.

Think twice about visiting Dorset right now

As you may know we have been putting out the message to ask people to think twice about visiting Dorset following the easing of restrictions by the Government. There has been a lot of coverage on this, and we have been featured on local TV news bulletins, as well as the front page of several national newspapers. We are holding our line and asking people to think twice about making a journey to visit Dorset and asking those who do live and work here to stay alert and continue to follow government guidelines on exercise and social distancing.

Our car parks and public toilets at visitor destinations across the Dorset Council are closed and will remain so for now but this will be reviewed regularly, and we will come under increasing pressure to open them again, possibly by the time you read this! We are continuing to monitor the traffic on the roads and the situation on the ground at beaches and other visitor centres. We will review arrangements, if needed, taking into account public health & safety – with the input of Town and Parish Councils.

Returning to work (Dorset Council) and COVID Office Arrangements

We are now starting to plan how we manage our office buildings as the lockdown restrictions begin to be relaxed. We will have to comply with social distancing requirements and so the numbers of desks available will be much reduced from what we would normally have for use. We will have to allocate specific desks to named individuals in the first instance, rather than the hotdesking which takes place at the moment. There will be a guidance document available for all staff affected shortly. We are not expecting or wanting huge numbers of staff to return to the offices at this stage.

Homelessness and rough sleepers

Since the start of the outbreak, our housing teams have helped 28 rough sleepers from across the county into accommodation – this has, and continues to be, challenging and we are operating as a multi-agency response to the situations this is creating on a daily basis. In addition, the team have also housed more than 120 homeless households in temporary accommodation and will continue to support these people into more permanent accommodation as the lockdown restrictions ease.

Business Grants

As of the middle of May Dorset Council made 7,462 grant payments to businesses in the Dorset Council area totalling £89m. Dorset Council have paid 92% of the grant claims we have received – meaning at the time of writing we have 629 that are either currently approved and awaiting the next payment run, or undergoing validation or they have just landed! And we have received a moderate but noticeable increase in the number of claims since last week's letters to businesses who had not yet made a claim. The national data recently released shows that only 7 councils out of 314 have made more payments than us and only 6

of the 314 have distributed more money to their local businesses than us so far. We have received a total of 1,160 claims that did not pass our validation/verification processes, so while we might have been anxious about processing volumes in the early days, this figure in particular proves that we were right not to relax our verification criteria and proceed with the appropriate validation measures in place. We are also receiving some very positive – and very welcome - feedback from businesses that are grateful for the funding and the way we have supported them.

Minerals Plan

In all the furore you may have missed the Minerals Site plan progress which has been 5 years in the making. The Plans are all fully adopted now, and we are waiting for some return to normality to arrange for them to be printed prior to distribution to our involved partners.

Transport Infrastructure Investment Fund

On the 14th May 2020, the Secretary of State for Transport, announced a £1.7 billion funding allocation to Combined Authorities and Local Highway Authorities for 2020/21 through the newly created Transport Infrastructure Investment Fund. Dorset's share of the £1.7 billion funding is set out below (as documented in the Department for Transport news story <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/multi-billion-pound-road-and-railway-investment-to-put-nation-on-path-to-recovery>), and includes our already confirmed annual funding allocation in the form of the following:

Highway Maintenance Block Allocation	£10,564,000
Highway Maintenance Block Incentive Element	£ 2,201,000
Integrated Transport Block (Improvements)	£ 1,971,000

The additional element for us comes in the form of the (mainly) Pothole Funds which equates to an additional £9,112,000, taking our total 2020/21 capital award to £23,848,000. This additional award is intended to alleviate pressure on highway authorities caused by Covid-19 and allows us to focus on restart issues and recovery. This additional funding is capital and thus can only be used for genuine renewal and enhancement, and not for revenue related activities such as gully emptying, side verging, reactive maintenance.

Schools and early years

This may well be superseded by the time you read this. If the virus threat level indicates it is safe, the government have indicated that schools will begin a phased and managed re-opening from the beginning of June. Initially this will involve early years settings/nurseries and primary schools - Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 only, with some face to face support for Years 10 and 12. As you will anticipate, managing this will look different in each school setting. Headteachers and early years leaders are assessing the risks as they seek to prioritise the safety of their pupils and staff. This may mean that things will be different to normal, for instance: part-time hours, staggered start and finish times, and shorter weeks.

Dorset Council's priority will continue to be ensuring provision for vulnerable children and children of critical workers (of all year groups). Of this cohort, attendance continues to steadily rise with about 3.5% of children attending school, including 634 who are deemed vulnerable. A third of early years settings are open for an average of 500 children (75% children of critical workers, 25% vulnerable).

Early help and safeguarding

Our family workers are supporting families with a variety of issues related to the lockdown, including managing home learning, behaviour and boundaries, keeping motivated and safe, and how to have socially distanced exercise. They are seeing a significant impact on families ranging from financial difficulties to mental health, access to food and medicine, and concerns around online safety and the tensions of sharing limited computer equipment. Concerns for vulnerable expectant mothers and 0-5s has led to some

additional work involving all our partners whilst working with new government health guidelines. As with previous weeks, colleagues are maintaining our statutory obligations and we continue to see children in their homes and communities as is required. We have been making excellent use of online tools to stay in touch with families, foster carers and conduct child protection conferences. Online gatherings have also led to some improved outcomes in our engagement with children and families. Our Children in Care Council are meeting regularly but virtually, with higher than normal attendance and engagement. The Director has been meeting with foster carers regularly to hear insights into being a carer during lockdown – and working together to shape services. There is some incredible work going on to improve the way we work in response to this crisis that will leave an indelible improvement on our services for some time.

Useful information available

There is a lot of information on the Dorset Council website, this includes contact information and ideas for things to do, including for children when they're at home. Here are some of the links:

Online resources for families <https://mailchi.mp/dorsetcouncil/online-resources>

Schools and families: <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/emergencies-severe-weather/emergencies/coronavirus/schools-and-families.aspx>

Information and landing page: <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/emergencies-severe-weather/emergencies/coronavirus/coronavirus-covid-19.aspx>

There remains a great deal of good advice on how people can protect themselves online at www.nhs.uk/coronavirus. Finally, any Dorset resident who needs additional support should be encouraged to call the Community Shield helpline: 01305 221000 (open 8am-8pm every day).

Ever thought about fostering?

We are running a campaign to recruit more foster carers. There's an even greater need at the moment, as some of our existing carers are shielding. We need more carers, otherwise some Dorset children may have to leave their friends and where they are settled and be placed in care elsewhere. If you've ever considered fostering, do take a look. Find out more at: www.fosterindorset.com

Public Health update and guidance changes

As of mid-May there were 7006 confirmed coronavirus cases across the southwest. This means that the region has the lowest infection rate in the country. While this is good news, it also presents a challenge as the government eases lockdown restrictions and more people from elsewhere in the country may be tempted to visit Dorset.

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. 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.

Broadband

Chris Loder MP and I have met with the CEO of BTOpenreach to lay out forcefully our disappointment at the implementation speed, cost and overruns of their implementing Superfast Broadband. We have another meeting planned and then we will be going to meet (virtually) the Minister of Technology to argue the case for Dorset being treated better than it has been historically.

Surgery

We are not holding face to face meetings for the moment. 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 clllaura.miller@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk telephone 07814 569563.

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