

Residents Survey

We run a residents' survey every year to allow us to track how we are perceived and to address any areas of concern. The most recent one was conducted at the end of 2020. I am really pleased to say that the survey found that:

- 90% of residents are satisfied with their local area as a place to live
- 72% of residents are satisfied with the way DC runs things (up from 61% last year)
- and 75% of residents think the DC keeps them well informed (up from 58% last year)

We are not complacent and there is much work to do, but it is pleasing to see these improved results. I will be sharing the full findings with you in a later article.

Community Governance Review

During the last few months, the Council has received a number of queries from Parish Councils asking how they can change their governance arrangements, all of which can be considered as part of the forthcoming Community Governance Review (CGR) , this will cover

- Creating, merging, altering or abolishing parishes (grouping or de-grouping parishes)
- Increasing or decreasing the number of Councillors
- Creating ward boundaries or changing existing Warding arrangements
- Changes to Parish names
- Correcting minor boundary anomalies.
- Changing a parish council into a parish meeting

The responsibility of undertaking CGRs falls to the principal council (Dorset Council in this case) The legislation that covers CGRs requires any Review to be completed within 12 months of DC publishing its Terms of Reference which is the document that sets the process running. Please note, any changes to governance arrangements agreed as part of the Review cannot take effect until the next scheduled elections in May 2024.

The process that DC will follow will be:

Publication of Terms of reference that sets out what will be covered – in this case it will be a review of all parishes that sit within the Dorset Council area (July 2021).

Public consultation for 12 weeks seeking proposals/initial submissions. (5 August to 28 October 2021)

Consideration of consultation responses and preparation of draft recommendations. (to be agreed by Full Council - December 2021)

Public consultation on draft recommendations. (20 December 2021 – 28 February 2022)

Consideration of further responses and then publication of final recommendations. (to be agreed by Full Council – April 2022)

The considerations that DC will need to apply that are set out in the guidance namely: -

The need to secure that community governance within the area under review:

- reflects the identities and interests of the community in that area.
- is effective and convenient.

The impact of community governance arrangements on community cohesion and the size, population and boundaries of a local community or parish.

The impact on electorate size of future development within the next 5 years.

Any changes will be set out in a Reorganisation Order – the Order will include a detailed map of any boundary changes with any changes taking effect at the next scheduled elections i.e. May 2024.

Obviously, if the parishes are content that their governance arrangements are working well, they do not need to make any submission. Parishes that do make a submission must achieve electoral equality – i.e. each Councillor will represent roughly the same number of electors. Obviously, this only applies where Councils are split into some form of warding which does not apply in West Purbeck. If parishes are proposing changes, DC will ask them to provide information about how this will ensure community cohesion e.g. what are the links within the community that leads them to recommend that certain areas should be linked together e.g. in the same ward or parish.

If parishes are seeking a change to the boundaries of the parish, we suggest that they start talking to the other parishes affected. Decisions are much more straight forward if there is community agreement beforehand.

Empty Homes

We estimate there are 400 long-term empty properties in Dorset. Each one is a wasted home. Demand for housing in the Dorset Council area is extremely high, with over 6000 people looking for a suitable home on the housing register. Empty homes also have the potential to damage communities by becoming derelict, overgrown or by attracting anti-social behaviour.

The Housing Team is urging people to come forward to report or seek help to deal with a long-term empty property. DC employs a dedicated Empty Homes Officer to investigate cases, help us identify the worst properties and then take the most appropriate action. We always start by offering owners of empty properties advice and assistance about how they can bring a property back into use. Loans of up to £25,000 are also available from Lendology Community Interest Company to help carry out repairs to bring the property back into use. Owners of properties that have been empty for two years or more may be able to claim a reduced rate of VAT on renovation or alteration works.

If offers of help and assistance haven't worked and a property is affecting the local community, robust enforcement action will be considered to bring the property back into use. This can include compulsory purchase or taking over the property by an Empty Dwelling Management Order. We are now actively working on over 30 of the worst empty properties where such action is either being progressed or considered. From April this year, houses which have been empty for 10 years or more will be charged 400% or quadruple Council Tax. This will mean an increase from £2,000 to £8,000 a year for a typical band 'D' empty home.

Become a foster carer

Every year, hundreds of children need foster carers in Dorset while they can't live with their own families. Could you open your home be one of our highly valued foster carers? Maybe your looking to reduce hours in the office or know someone who is looking to start a new career? Foster carers provide love, care and vital support for children and families who need it. If you think you have the qualities that could help children flourish, then get in touch. As a foster carer, you receive a weekly fee and a weekly allowance for each child you look after.

You will have a free programme of learning and development from experts, training courses, learning on-line and other methods. Below is the moving story of one such caring family.

Susan Lochrie is a foster carer and has looked after more than fifty children over the last three decades with the help of her husband Des. Since moving to Weymouth in 1988, they have provided short and longer-term care for children with disabilities as well as bringing up three children of their own. She says: "The more we welcomed, the more we enjoyed it so when we were asked to foster an autistic child with learning disabilities for a week, we were pleased and excited to welcome her to our family. This turned into a two-year placement and the family never looked back. We have continued to provide day care to many children – some only came for a short time, others for longer. We started fostering a girl aged three and she came to us once a fortnight, before eventually moving to a boarding school at the age of 17. We also decided to adopt a little boy at the time when he was five to give him a permanent home. I am proud to say our three children never complained about the additional family members as they were growing up. As they now have their own homes, we have three young people with Learning Disabilities staying with us permanently. The oldest turned 18 this year. Over the years, some of the most satisfying times have been when the foster children have been at their most difficult to care for. These are the times when you realise how much the parents need the break and we feel happy to provide some respite for them. We tend to be quite a laid-back family and accept the children the way they are and support them however they are feeling. We love hearing from all the foster children and their families who keep in touch and finding out how they are getting on. To anyone thinking about fostering, I would highly recommend starting with short break caring. Many carers I know started this way, but as time went on enjoyed it so much, they became full time carers. Our life now is rarely quiet or straightforward, but we love it that way. We love them all just the way they are. Our years of fostering have given us so many memories, some of sadness and frustration, but many more of fun, love and many laughs, and overriding it all is the feeling of satisfaction that we have made a difference to the life of every single person.

Laptops

Pupils across Dorset have benefitted from more than 4,500 laptops and tablets to date, as the government hits an important milestone in its roll-out of devices to support disadvantaged young people. More than 1 million devices have now been delivered to schools and local authorities across England as part of a £400million investment that will support schools and young people for years to come.

A total of 31,147 devices have been delivered across the South West, including 4,521 in Dorset. This comprises 2,769 in the DC area and 1,752 in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole. The figures don't include devices delivered directly to multi-academy trusts.

Children returning to school

97% of Dorset children returned to school on March 8th.

Plans are again in place to manage any cases of Covid 19 and all education providers will continue to work closely with public health. If cases occur, Dorset Council and Public Health teams will work closely with schools and colleges to communicate any necessary actions to staff, parents, carers and students. School Transport will run as normal. Everyone can help by following the guidance outside of school and college, which can be found at [gov.uk/coronavirus](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus)

PPE for Carers

Unpaid carers in the DC area can now request free Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for when they are carrying out their caring responsibilities. Following an announcement from the

Department for Health & Social Care, unpaid carers in the DC area can now request free PPE for when they are carrying out their caring responsibilities. There is a particular focus on extra-resident carers (those who live outside of the household of the cared for person). Dorset Council will be the first point of contact for enquiries and will register carers' PPE needs.

Virtual meetings

With emergency rules allowing councils and communities to meet online expiring on May 7, fears are growing that local decisions will grind to a halt. The Lawyers in Local Government group and Association of Democratic Services Officers are seeking a High Court ruling to keep council meetings going virtually without the need for primary legislation.

This is going to cause a major problem if this is not resolved and we are currently working with our MPs to ensure adequate legislation is enacted to allow virtual meetings along with some opportunity for face to face meeting as well, this is sometimes called hybrid meetings.

Free Parking Policy

To support local economy, Dorset Council will give a total of 6 free parking days in Dorset Council car parks each year. This is made up of the following:

At the request of the Town or Parish Council free parking in all Dorset Council car parks for four days each year, for events which generate valuable footfall for that town. These four days cannot be used in December but can be used on Sundays.

At the request of the Town or Parish Council free parking in all Dorset Council Town Centre car parks for that town on one weekday in December.

Free parking in all Dorset Council Town Centre car parks on Small Business Saturday in December.

No other days in December will be considered unless the Town Council or Local BID is willing to meet the cost of the lost income at an amount to be calculated by the Council's parking team based on average weekend costs for that time of year. Any requests for free use of the six days will be reviewed by the Parking Services Team and a record maintained. Requests should be emailed to parking@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk six weeks prior to the free parking date and you should expect a response within 5 working days. This policy starts from 1/03/2021.

Spring Clean of Dorset Verges

Dorset Council's fight against roadside litter is continuing – with the annual spring clean of verges along some of the county's busiest roads. Following vegetation being cut back; the removal of bushes, shrubs and long grass reveals the full extent of littering by drivers and verges quickly become an eyesore. The council's waste team is working with countryside officers to ensure that litter picking is scheduled following the flailing of roadside verges.

Dorset Council is supporting this year's #LoveYourVerge campaign, which will see 'pop-up' signage on roadsides to celebrate local habitat and the biodiversity across Dorset and encourage residents and visitors to value verges and other open spaces. The campaign is a collaboration between the council's Greenspace Service and Litter Free Dorset. Residents can report litter problems, fly-tipping and rubbish being thrown from a vehicle - online.

Step Up to a career in child and family social work

Social work is a challenging but rewarding career which can make a real difference for children and families. Dorset Council are looking for strong graduates who have experience of working with children, young people and families, and who can demonstrate their maturity and emotional resilience. Step Up to Social Work is a 14-month, full-time programme funded by the Department for Education. It is being delivered locally by a regional partnership including Dorset Council, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, Wiltshire Council and Bournemouth University. The course gives trainees an intensive, hands-on experience of working in a real-life social work role working with children and families within a local authority children's services alongside academic learning.

Those successful in gaining a place will have all their course fees paid and will be entitled to a bursary of £19,833 tax free for the duration of the course. On completing the programme, students will obtain a Post-Graduate Diploma in Social Work, allowing them to register and practice as a social worker, and to apply for any social worker vacancies available. Online applications are open until 7 April. Students can expect to start the programme in January 2022 and completing their training in March 2023.

St Mary's School near Shaftsbury

Dorset Council has recently completed a consultation on the idea to create a new school for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) on the former St Mary's School site near Shaftsbury, against other alternative options for the site. The site has the potential to become somewhere that Dorset children and adults can access educational and community facilities for Dorset children and adults, which could involve a combination of uses. More information in later reports.

Climate Change

Consultation on our proposals concluded on 20 January and we received over 1,500 responses. Thank you to everyone who responded. Time is now being taken to analyse the feedback from those who completed the survey before bringing the Strategy and Action Plan back for approval in April. As stated previously, climate and ecological change is not the only challenge we face, so funding for the delivery of our ambitious programme will need to be prioritised alongside the other key funding pressures, particularly from the demands-based services like social care which the council has a statutory obligation to provide.

However, I am pleased to say that we have recently secured several pots of funding from Government to help with our climate work. Last month we commenced construction of a sustainable travel route in Wimborne and Colehill, made possible from £79 million funding awarded to Dorset Council and BCP Council as part of the Government's Transforming Cities Fund scheme. We also recently received notice that we had been successful in being awarded £298,000 for the Low Carbon Skills Fund. In addition, we have also been offered £18.7 million to enable major works to take place to reduce the council's carbon footprint across its buildings. This funding is really welcomed and will enable the council to start delivering its strategic climate and ecological objectives.

2021-22 Budget

I put a very long article in last month's report about our proposals for Council Tax for the coming year. So, I would just add some general points.

Every year budget setting has become more challenging and 2021/22 is certainly no exception. The twin uncertainties of a one-year settlement and the serious short to medium impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has created shortfalls in funding which have had a real impact on the revenue budget and on our ability to maintain discretionary services, which are

very visible and valued by our residents. Increasing pressures in the demands-based services - Adults and Children's Social Care - has created the greatest challenge. We have a balanced budget for the next council year, which depends on increasing council tax and ensuring that the transformation of services moves forward at pace.

Digital Hotline

A special hotline set up to help people with digital enquiries has seen the number of calls it receives almost triple during this latest lockdown. From January 5 to February 5, the Dorset Digital Hotline received 132 calls – its biggest ever monthly total and nearly three times the average monthly calls it received in the last quarter of 2020. Operated by volunteer Digital Champions, the hotline has helped people in the last month with a wide range of enquiries, from using Zoom to what device they can buy.

The hotline was set up by Dorset Council in March last year during the first lockdown and when the Digital Champions were no longer able to help people face to face in libraries. On day one of lockdown three, the first call to the hotline was from a gentleman who had tested positive for Covid-19 and needed help with arranging online shopping delivery slots. Other calls received during January included a woman whose tablet froze while she was in the middle of internet banking; and a partially sighted resident who needed help on how to make her screen larger. A school that needed advice on clearing old information from laptops it had received as a gift also got in touch.

The Digital Hotline – 01305 221048 – is open Mondays to Fridays from 10am to midday (except Bank Holidays). Outside of these times you can leave a message, and someone will get back to you.

Household Recycling Centres

Do not visit a household recycling centre (HRC, or “the tip”) right now unless your waste cannot be stored safely at home. This is the simple message that Dorset Council is using to help deal with rising visitor numbers. Recent warm weather has resulted in HRCs becoming busy again as visitors drop off their items – primarily garden waste and wood – which is starting to cause long queues, creating access problems for residents, businesses and kerbside collection vehicles.

Last May, Dorset Council re-opened its HRCs with safety restrictions in place after they were closed in the early stages of the pandemic. Initially, extra people were brought in to manage queuing traffic, but this was scaled back as visitor numbers eased over the summer, with volunteers and employees deployed elsewhere. This had continued to work well over the colder months when visitor numbers are traditionally lower, but lately the mild weather in Dorset has encouraged people to begin gardening again, or Spring cleaning. This produces more waste, which in turn causes visitor numbers to rise.

Safety restrictions remain in place, meaning that access to each HRC still hasn't returned to pre-COVID levels. For example, parts of each site may have been sectioned off to help with social distancing, there can only be one person on the access steps at any given time and on-site staff are not permitted to physically help visitors unload and drop off their waste. As a result, vehicle access and visitor time on site is slower than usual. Some people have been making multiple trips per day, while others have even complained about the delays in being able to access each site, while contributing to the traffic problems.

If you can keep hold of your waste safely at home, then please do so until restrictions have been lifted. If you are gardening, please consider home-composting or signing up for our garden waste service. Thank you for your patience and cooperation.

Domestic Abuse Support

With the continued pressures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Dorset residents experiencing domestic abuse are reminded they can get confidential advice and support. For some people, home is not a safe place right now. Lockdown measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have left them feeling trapped and at greater risk of harm. If you are experiencing domestic abuse, please reach out. Specialist advisers have been available throughout lockdown and continue to be there. They will listen to you, and together you can talk about different options and work out what is right for you, these support services can be contacted 24 hours a day to help you.

Where to get support: in an emergency, always dial 999. Speak to You First advisers are available anytime day or night on 0800 032 5204. Alternatively, you can see a range of other support options at www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/dvahelp. Or call the National Domestic Abuse Helpline for free and confidential advice, 24 hours a day on 0808 2000 247.

Dorset Council is also set to receive an additional £650,000 from the government to fund a new duty providing support for victims and their children, including safe accommodation. This is part of the government's forthcoming Domestic Abuse Bill.

Codeword scheme; Dorset Council is also supporting the national "AskforANI" campaign which enables victims of domestic abuse to get support at their local pharmacy. Look out for a poster in the window of your local pharmacy and ask for Ani (pronounced Annie). You'll be taken by a staff member to a private room where you will be put in touch with support services which can help you. Please reach out, you are not alone.

Surgery

We are not holding face to face meetings until we are clear to do so under government guidelines. However, we would be more than delighted to talk to you on the telephone or via Zoom. Please ring or email us with the subject matter so that we can prepare ourselves. Peter's email address is peterwharf@hotmail.com telephone 07986 600799 and Laura's is cllrLaura.miller@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk telephone 07814 569563.

Peter Wharf & Laura Miller, Dorset Councillors for West Purbeck