

## **Summer Visitors**

Dorset Council is part of a multi-agency group of partners including Dorset Police, Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service, Dorset health partners and BCP Council, working together to tackle some of the more undesirable experiences from last year.

Dorset attracts around 3.6 million overnight visits and 26.4 million day-visitors annually. In June last year travel restrictions had been relaxed but hotels, campsites and public toilets remained closed due to Covid-19. Dorset's most popular destinations became overcrowded and experienced problems with littering, illegal parking and outdoor toileting. Summer 2021 is likely to be very busy again, with 'stay-cationers' looking for a coastal retreat but possibly unable to travel abroad until later in the season. Hotspots last summer included West Bay, West Bexington, Weymouth, Lulworth and Swanage.

DORSET has been awarded more than £816,000 as part of a government initiative to help towns reopen as restrictions ease. The money, announced by Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick, comes from the government's wider £56 million Welcome Back Fund scheme. BCP Council has been awarded more than £416,000 and Dorset Council more than £400,000. Using this Government funding, the Council will employ more parking wardens, put in place more waste bins and collections, improved signage to warn of dangers of disposable BBQs and they are considering a possible ban on beach camping at some sites, where there are currently no restrictions. However, this will not stop any determined law breakers, so we have requested that the police adopt a greater and more high profile role in responding to incidents.

The council is also looking at innovative ideas like electric hot plate installations at key locations to deter the use of disposable BBQs known to cause devastating fires, and working with Highways Agency to identify any new tow-away areas in places where irresponsible parking is a problem. The council is also working closely with landowners to open up properly managed additional camping / parking areas.

## **Shielding Support is still available**

Advice for people considered clinically extremely vulnerable because of COVID-19 changed from 1 April as the numbers of new cases continues to fall. Residents in this category should have received a letter from the government, advising them that they no longer need to shield. The letter also offers new guidance how they can safely start to get back out and about. Support from Dorset Council will remain in place for anyone who has been shielding and needs some extra help, as well as for anyone needing to self-isolate. Help with things like grocery shopping, travelling to vaccination appointments, or even dog walking can be accessed at [www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/coronavirus). or by calling the Dorset Together helpline 01305 221000.

## **Defence BattleLab**

The Defence BattleLab is being built at the Dorset Innovation Park at Winfrith and will feature an engineering workshop, as well as working and conference areas for joint use. The MOD has committed £3.1m for the project, while Dorset Council and the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership will contribute an additional £2.6m. This facility will enable MOD to work with SMEs and academia to develop new products and technologies with commercial potential.

The Army BattleLab will be an integral part of the facility as the Army Research Innovation & Experimentation Laboratory (ARIEL) works with industry to improve existing technology and equipment and experiment with new ideas. In the first 10 years, the BattleLab is expected to create 90 jobs and provide a £4m boost to the local economy.

### **Turing Scheme**

Schools and colleges across Dorset are being urged to apply for the government's new Turing Scheme, which will provide young people with the opportunity to study and work around the world. The landmark scheme, which replaces the UK's participation in the EU's Erasmus programme, will be backed by £110million in funding in 2021/22. Schools, colleges, and universities can now apply for funding, which will provide for 35,000 global exchanges from this September – a similar level to the previous scheme.

The Turing Scheme will target students from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas who were less likely to benefit from the Erasmus programme by supporting the costs of studying and working abroad, providing up to a maximum of £490 per month, levelling up opportunity for all students. Schools, colleges and universities will all be supported with the cost of administering the programme and are encouraged to form partnerships around the world. More details about the application process, including funding and eligibility levels, are available on the Turing Scheme website at [www.turing-scheme.org.uk](http://www.turing-scheme.org.uk).

A government spokesman said: "The programme's focus on social mobility and value for money will open up more opportunities for international education and travel to all of our students, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who were less likely to benefit from the previous EU scheme. I urge all universities, schools and colleges from all corners of the UK to start their applications and partner up with countries."

### **Electric vehicle charge points**

New electric vehicle charge points are now ready to use in five car parks in Dorset - with more to be switched on in the coming weeks. Electric vehicle charge points have been installed and are now live at Wollaston Field car park, Dorchester; Gas Lane, Gillingham; Old Market Yard, Sherborne; The Hub car park, Verwood; and King Street car park, Wimborne. The installation of the new charge points is one of several measures in Dorset Council's ambition to become zero carbon by 2040 and helps to meet several actions in its Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy Action Plan. More car charging points will be ready to use in the coming months, a total of 17 council-owned car parks across the Dorset Council area will have the new electric car charging facilities - with each location having a minimum of two charge points. The government plans to phase out sales of new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030, so it is important drivers are offered more sustainable travel options now.

The fast (22kW) charge points DC are installing (at no cost to the Council Taxpayers) are supplied with 100% renewable energy and will enable drivers to charge their electric vehicles while visiting the county's towns. A quick top-up (a charge of 15 minutes) will enable a journey of about 15 miles, or a full charge will take 2-4 hours, depending on the vehicle. To see the locations of all Dorset's charge points, visit [www.zap-map.com](http://www.zap-map.com)

### **Abandoned Vehicles**

On Tuesday 16 March, officers from Dorset Council's Waste Enforcement Team carried out an operation targeting untaxed vehicles in Weymouth that were reported as abandoned by members of the public. This followed a similar operation the previous week when the team attended three locations across Dorset, responding to abandoned vehicle reports in Bridport,

Portland, and Swanage. For a vehicle to be considered “abandoned”, it must be parked on public land/highway (such as a residential road) and not be taxed. The Enforcement Team receive around 1,300 legitimate reports of abandoned vehicles each year, with about 60% qualifying for enforcement such as fines, clamping and/or removal.

If members of the public wish to report an untaxed vehicle, this can be done online. We would encourage the vehicle owners to contact the Waste Enforcement Team on 01305 225473 so that officers can assist them to secure the release of their vehicle. Please note that if a vehicle has been left on the highway and is causing a hazard or has been burnt out and reported by the police, its tax and MOT status is irrelevant, and Dorset Council will investigate. If any member of the public suspects a vehicle has been abandoned on a public highway, they should report it to us via our online form or by calling 01305 221040.

### **Please don't recycle nappies!**

A campaign has been launched aimed at stopping disposable nappies from contaminating recycling as a survey reveals more than one million UK nappy users are putting them in their recycling bins. Dorset Council has joined forces with environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy to launch the campaign. A council spokesman said: "Each year there are around 3,300 births recorded in Dorset and, at an estimated 2,200 nappies per baby per year, this means there are about seven million used disposable nappies in Dorset household waste every year."

Recycling bins containing materials which cannot be recycled at the kerbside cannot be collected for fear of contaminating the whole lorry load. Instead they are collected as rubbish and sent for treatment, at a greater expense to the council and the taxpayer. Dorset Council hopes that not only will the campaign raise awareness of the problem of putting nappies in recycling bins, it will encourage people to choose to start using reusable nappies which are better for the environment and save money for both parents and the council. The campaign will be appearing on billboards around the country. In Dorset, the campaign will mainly be supported by social media posts and advertising.

### **Community Safety – Domestic Abuse Legislation, Modern Slavery and Prevent**

The Domestic Abuse Bill is currently at the House of Lords stage of the Parliamentary process. The aim is for it to become law in April 2021. There will be several impacts on the Council who must lead on developing local partnership arrangements, needs assessments and strategies. There are also several requirements on specific services. Dorset Council staff are required by law to report to the Home Office if they come across anyone they feel might be a victim of Modern slavery. Responsibilities relating to this work have been updated recently and we've refreshed our working protocol in response.

The Council is also under a legal duty to help prevent people being drawn into terrorism. There are several specific responsibilities including training our staff on 'Prevent' and making sure Council buildings aren't used to promote extremism. The Council is also responsible for running Channel Panels. These multi-agency panels are used to bring organisations together and put support packages in place to steer people away from extremist activity.

### **Homelessness and Housing Need**

We continue to have high demand for temporary and emergency accommodation but are delivering plans to acquire greater amounts of settled housing for people to move on into. This has been helped by the funding we have received from MHCLG and the Council to acquire new homes and to provide support when necessary. This, added to the new homes provided

by Housing Associations, has helped us to begin reducing (from the Summer peak) the numbers of people dependent on emergency and temporary accommodation.

### **Housing Standards**

One of the Council's responsibilities is to focus on improving standards in the private rented sector, and to take enforcement action when encouragement or advice has not worked. Like many other services, to protect residents and staff from the ongoing risks of COVID, we have had to significantly limit the number and type of physical inspections undertaken. The future national 'road map' should provide an opportunity to continue with more inspections where it is safe and appropriate to do so. Despite the restrictions, the Team has adapted to new ways of working and continued to help tenants with their repair concerns. We have successfully intervened or assisted on several complex cases. The two cases below provide some brief examples of the recent enforcement work of the team.

#### **Tenants protected from unsafe accommodation**

Officers were called to a converted stable block which was being used for rented accommodation by a couple and their two young children; they found unsafe living conditions including disrepair to flooring and bathroom fittings. The landlord had no gas safety certificate or Energy Performance Certificate (EPC). The owner was required to carry out repairs and a legal notice was served to ensure an EPC was obtained. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) were contacted and they required the gas certificate to be obtained. Upon inspection by a Gas Safe engineer, the gas boiler was found to be dangerous and was condemned. A new gas boiler was installed. The family were moved into safe accommodation via Housing Services and the landlord has since ceased using the accommodation for rent.

#### **Maisonette Improved and Inaccurate Energy Performance Certificate Investigated**

Following a complaint significant defects were found to a 3rd and 4th floor maisonette and the common areas leading to it; exposed live electrical wiring, damage to the fire detection system, combustible items in the means of escape, an unguarded 2.5 meter drop between communal landings, areas of penetrating, rising damp and a rodent infestation. This was a new tenancy and the officer worked with the Housing Services Team to cancel the tenancy and get the tenant's deposit refunded. Due to the conditions present Housing Services found alternative accommodation for the family and their children.

To ensure it was safe the whole property was then inspected by the Housing Standards Team and Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service. The landlord has now been required to carry out improvements before it is re-let.

#### **A direct message from the Police concerning violence against women**

Recently many people in our communities have felt the need to speak out about their experiences and fears of violence, abuse, or harassment in this country. We acknowledge that this is a very real and concerning problem in our own communities in Dorset and recognise that people are worried. We would like to reassure everyone that we understand your concerns and we are listening to them. It is completely unacceptable for women of any age to feel unsafe whether they are at home, on the streets, in school or at work.

This is a problem that directly affects half of our communities and we need to ensure women and all in our communities feel safe. It is paramount that we as a police service are part of the solution, stand alongside women and girls in our communities and bring about real change that will benefit generations to come. Dorset Police remains absolutely committed to protecting

everyone from violence and society must play their part in stopping this. We take reports of violence, harassment, and assault very seriously. We will investigate these reports and do everything we can, working with partners across the criminal justice system, to bring offenders to justice. We will continue to work with those people affected to better understand the impact on them and how we can improve our response. As always, we encourage anyone who has been the victim of rape, sexual assault, abuse or harassment to have the confidence to report it to us. We are here for you.

### **South Walks House Dorchester**

Dorset Council is considering that its headquarters in South Walks House, Dorchester, be permanently closed and transformed for other use, possibly residential. The Dorchester offices have been closed since the start of lockdown last year and even with an easing of restrictions Dorset Council has said it will continue to have many of its staff working from home, at least part-time. The council has proposed the library and learning centre, attached to the west end of the building, will remain open, with a new customer access point within it.

There is little demand in Dorchester for anything like the amount of office accommodation available in South Walks House, either for permanent or shared use. In the next few months as business returns to normal we anticipate we will find more and more office space becoming available as it is left by businesses failing or deciding to work more remotely.

We are proposing that employees be moved to County Hall, Coalition Park, and plan to invest £2.1m into a range of energy saving measures there. Clearly there remain considerable savings to be made as a result of the abolition of five District Councils and a full study of all the office accommodation in the whole of Dorset is now underway

### **Project Gigabit - next steps in connecting the nation to fast, reliable broadband**

We are very pleased to be one of only six areas in the UK to benefit from the first tranche of the government's £5bn Project Gigabit . This will bring ultra-fast broadband to some of the most rural and hard to reach parts of the county and will help put Dorset on the digital map. It will of course still leave many rural residents waiting for this service.

This is alongside our ground-breaking 5G RuralDorset project which continues to receive recognition, as well as other our broadband interventions will in time increase both fixed-line and mobile connectivity in the County. This follows months of behind-the-scenes lobbying for better broadband in Dorset - led by West Dorset MP Chris Loder and myself. Projects will prioritise Dorset areas that currently have slow connections and will be predominantly aimed at schools and doctors' surgeries. Dorset has almost 96 per cent superfast coverage thanks to the council's partnership with Openreach, which began nine years ago. However, when it comes to the next generation of gigabit capable broadband, Dorset only has seven per cent coverage, compared with 38 per cent nationally. We have a letter from the Digital Minister supporting our programme and in it two links below, which are of relevance to the project, particularly those who are in very hard to reach premises

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-new-5bn-project-gigabit>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/improving-broadband-for-very-hard-to-reach-premises>

### **Levelling Up Fund**

The 2021/22 to 2024/25 Levelling Up Fund is a £4.8bn joint venture between the Department for Transport, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Treasury

investing in local infrastructure that has a visible impact on people and their communities. While the Fund is open to every local area, it is especially intended to drive investment in places where it can make the biggest difference to everyday life, including ex-industrial areas, deprived towns and coastal communities. An index of priority places for the Levelling Up Fund places local authorities into categories 1, 2 or 3, depending on their identified level of need, with category 1 representing places deemed in most need of investment through this fund. Dorset Council is in Category 3. We have expressed our considerable disappointment on this to our MPs and asked them to lobby government for a change to the grading mechanism.

Theoretically Dorset Council can have up to four successful bids, but this likelihood is tempered by being in the lowest priority category.

### **St Mary's School near Shaftsbury**

Local people and community groups have given their views on the future of the former St Mary's school site near Shaftsbury. Of the 1,400 people who responded to the recent survey from Dorset Council, an overwhelming 92 per cent expressed their support for the site to continue to be used for educational purposes. The majority, 89 per cent favoured using the site as a SEND (special educational needs and or disabilities) school. Dorset residents also backed the idea of creating complementary facilities for vulnerable children, young people and adults alongside its educational purpose, (82 per cent). The responses will now be carefully considered before a decision on the future of the site is made at an upcoming meeting of Dorset Council's Cabinet.

### **Planning Applications received and decisions issued**

I have been asked to indicate the current performance levels within the Planning department. Factors affecting the performance are the amalgamation of six different planning systems into one, which is well on track: Also the level of applications and the levels of sickness, in some cases Covid-19.

On average we receive 376 applications per month (Jan 2019 – Dec 2020). Between April & Jun 2020 we received a reduced number of applications, but there has been a general upward trend since July 2020, and this is continuing. In February this year we received nearly 600 applications, that's almost double our usual rate.

On average we issue 317 decisions a month (based on data from Jan 2019 – Feb 2021). There has been a slight reduction in decisions issued since last August (average of 284 decisions issued). This reflects the impacts of implementing a new structure and IT system and recruiting to vacant posts – we're now aiming for a phased increase in decisions issued each month. Our target timescale for determining small scale applications (minors and others) is 8 weeks. We are not currently meeting this target; we're currently determining householder applications within an average of 10 weeks and 15 weeks for minors. (Based on Feb 2021 data)

The current number of applications received exceeds the number of decisions we can issue. We plan to increase the number of decisions we issue, to clear the backlog and build capacity for the future. This will involve efficiencies with the new systems and using contractors to help us in the interim.

### **Litter Picking A31**

As was requested, litter picking along the A31 in Purbeck has started and will continue for the next few months.

### **Virtual Meetings**

Government recently announced that there would be no extension for local authority virtual meetings to be held after 7 May, due to lack of Parliamentary time to consider this matter. This creates a challenging situation as COVID restrictions are not anticipated to be lifted fully until 21 June at the earliest. In the meantime, we do not have any meeting spaces big enough for all 82 councillors to meet in person in a COVID secure way. To give an indication of the current restrictions, within the whole of the South Walks House committee suite space, there is only sufficient room for a maximum of 15 people to meet in a COVID secure way. And in the County Hall council chamber, it would only be possible for a maximum of 18 people to meet in a COVID secure way. This would not even allow for Cabinet meetings to be held in person.

Our democratic services team has also looked at other possible venues across Dorset, but none have been found where all 82 councillors could meet in person and conduct a Full Council meeting in a COVID secure way. As a result, we have had to move our Annual Council meeting forward by a few days to 4 May so it can be held virtually. We do not yet know whether council meetings will revert to being held in person from 21 June, and this will depend on Government guidance based on the current COVID situation. We have been continually lobbying Government for councils to retain the ability to choose when they whether they want to hold meetings in person, online, or as a hybrid in future. In light of this situation, we have been exploring the options for how we hold council meetings in the interim period between 7 May and 21 June, in a way that is legal, COVID secure, and enables the democratic process to continue. More on this next month

### **The choice of schools for Children**

Recently parents across the county found out which primary, first junior or middle school their child will be going to in September 2021. Of the 4482 applications – 99.09 per cent of parents are receiving the good news that their child has gained one of their three preferences, compared to last years' figure of 98.8 per cent. This includes places for those starting school for the first time, transferring from infant to junior school and transferring from first to middle schools. Of the 3105 applications for a reception place at Primary, Infant and First schools put into Dorset Council, 98.9 per cent have secured a place at one of their preferred schools. 100 per cent of children got their first choice for junior school, 97.5 per cent for middle school and 94 per cent for reception.

Any parents who failed to get their highest preference school and are wanting to appeal against the decision can do so on school admissions page on the website.

### **Surgery**

We are not holding face to face meetings until we are allowed 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