

Dorset Council Report

Beacon Ward

Cllr Jane Somper

May 2020

Virtual Council Meetings

It is heartening to see so many parishes holding their meetings virtually and so seamlessly, it is so important for residents to feel reassured that parish business is still being carried out. I've enjoyed zoom and google hangout meetings with many of you and although there has been the odd teething issue, I think these have been ironed out.

Dorset Council is holding all its meetings virtually to, using Microsoft Teams, but there has been discussion from some members around other platforms, personally I am happy using Teams.

DC has held a number of meetings, including Cabinet, Audit & Governance, EAP's, Planning and Scrutiny and on June 11th DC will be holding its first virtual Full Council meeting. A new web page has been set up with details all the meetings being held, below is a link to the page which lists the agenda and has a link to access the meeting live or you can view a recording. <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/councillors-committees-elections/committees/virtual-committee-meetings.aspx>

Visitors to Dorset Beaches and Beauty Spots

We will all have seen the awful photographs and some videos of the many visitors who descended upon Durdle Door. DC is continuing with the message across all platforms available to people thinking of visiting our beaches and beauty spots to "Think again".

Thanks to the residents here in Dorset who have carefully followed the guidance we have the third lowest infection rate in the country. Dorset does have a large older population and many people with health conditions which make them more vulnerable and we want to continue to protect them and each other and our priority absolutely remains the with well- being of residents.

Due to the easing of some rules some car parks and public lavatories have re-opened. DC is encouraging contactless payment through smartphone apps in order to minimise risks when touching machines, but in response to public requests, and lobbying by my self and other councillors, cash and card payments can now be accepted. Caution still needs to be exercised and it is advisable to wear gloves when handling the machines if you are needing to touch them.

Planning

You will know that planning applications are continuing to come in to DC across the Ward. DC Planning Officers are working remotely from home in what can be challenging conditions with technology. Nevertheless planning applications are progressing through the system and decisions are being made in line with the exact same protocols and policies as were in place before.

Any Neighbourhood Plans cannot go to referendum until DC are able to make arrangements to carry these out but the Planning Inspectorate has agreed to assign it greater planning weight until that time.

Returning to Work

DC are now starting to plan how the office buildings are managed as the lockdown restrictions begin to be relaxed. There is of course a need 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. Officers will have to allocate specific desks to named individuals in the first instance. There will be a guidance document available for all staff affected in the next few weeks.

Supporting Rough Sleepers and Homeless People

During the COVID19 outbreak, our housing team has done great work getting rough sleepers and other people presenting as homeless into B&B and hotel accommodation. However, this is not a long-term solution. Plans are now being developed to support people into more settled accommodation, and to provide wrap-around support for issues like mental health and drug addiction. The number of people finding themselves homeless during COVID19 has more than doubled in the Dorset Council area, as people found themselves no longer able to sofa surf or as relationships broke down. The Housing Team housing team have shown great dedication and for their hard work in this important area. We will be developing the action from this and this will be shared with our partners in local town and parish councils and the public as discussion and policy progresses.

Update from Children's Services

Children's services have reached a milestone with Blueprint for Change: Children's services will now be moving into the implementation phase of the new model, aiming to have it up and running fully by 1 September. It has not been easy progressing this during the Covid outbreak, but it's great to see that new ways of working can now start to be implemented for the benefit of our local children, young people and families.

Staff from Children's services also shared some further items of good news:

- Ofsted and the Department for Education have confirmed that they are pleased with progress being made by Dorset Council and are reducing the frequency of their check-ins with us.
- Social worker recruitment is going well, with a number of new social workers due to join the service over the coming months.
- Following the publicity and call for more foster carers, Dorset Council has had an increase in foster carer enquiries, showing the recruitment activity seems to be working well.

Returning to School

Some schools are open during the May half term for key worker children and many will open for the newly identified year groups from June 1st more and indeed all are planning to be open for those year groups from June 8th

Face-to-face contact with young people in years 10 and 12 is also being planned for the summer-term, with schools making direct contact with applicable families with details.

Children of critical workers, and those deemed vulnerable (of all year groups) will continue to be prioritised within school provision.

The majority of early years settings will be open from the 1st June. From initial estimates, they anticipate that just under half of their roll of children will return at the beginning of the summer term.

Support for Dorset Business

Dorset Council has been responsible for administering the national Government schemes to support businesses in the crisis. Dorset Council had the largest fund of business grants in the country to administer and to date have paid out £92.3m to 7,830 companies. All this work has been done by Council staff, so it is pleasing to report that Dorset was in the top 2% nationally in getting these grants out the door to our Dorset businesses.

A number of businesses do not qualify for business continuation grants nor for the business rates relief schemes so, following lobbying from Dorset among others, a further Discretionary Grant Scheme, with £6m to distribute, was introduced recently. I have been in touch with several businesses who fell through the gap to ensure they are aware of the scheme and don't miss out.

Dorset Council has also been working closely with partner organisations and the Dorset MPs to lobby for support for local businesses, notably hospitality and dairy farming which is of great importance in the Beacon Ward.

Ward Activity

During the past few months important Highways works have been carried out while the roads were quieter and two important projects were scheduled, with one completed and another in Iwerne Minster where investigations in to ongoing drainage issues have resulted in a dig down required to finally, I hope, get to the bottom of what has caused the flooding outside the Talbot for so long from middle of June. I will be meeting with highways teams to discuss other ongoing issues around the ward that need addressing.

I have also taken the opportunity to make contact with the officers who run Dorset Council Estate and will be meeting with senior officers and visiting some county farms and other council owned land when we are all able to do so safely.

Of course at the beginning of lockdown we saw significant drops in the numbers of cars on the roads, and although there were some drops in HGV's that soon began to rise as goods and food was being transported, along with smaller vans that were delivering the food and medicines and other items that had been ordered online.

As lockdown is gradually eased and more shops begin to open again we will continue to see increased traffic activity. The government have told us that Local Authorities will take the lead in planning for recovery - in the economy, local services, community life and well-being. Life must eventually move forward but it is unlikely to return to exactly how it was before. Already, the Council has begun planning for the new normal and the impact of Covid is reflected in our recovery plans. Key to this will be the rebuilding of the Dorset economy, encouraging new business start-ups and reviving town centres. A Report on Economic Growth will go to Cabinet in the summer.