

Report to the Parish Council October 2023
Councillor Jill Haynes, Chalk Valleys Ward, Dorset Council

Dear Clerks, Councillors and Residents,

Please find my Dorset Council report for November and December. There is still a lot more work to be done on the budget and in particular we will not know our actual government grant and settlement details until 21st December giving the number crunchers much unwanted work over Christmas. The weather has been particularly bad, and many have suffered with the high rainfall and flooding, my deepest sympathy if this has happened to you and if there is anything in particular I can assist with please let me know. I therefore wish you all a Merry Christmas and a peaceful and prosperous New Year.

Best Wishes Jill

Dorset Shared Prosperity Investment Fund

The allocation to Dorset Council is £6.4M across three categories!! This is a HUGE amount of available grant funding so get your thinking hats on and apply.

The Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) and the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) are part of UK government Levelling Up policy. Their aims are twofold: To level up economically through improvements to productivity and to increase pride in place. They fulfil a broadly similar function to that covered by EU regional funding in the recent past, the main differences being (i) these funds are to be administered by Local Authorities rather than Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) and (ii) rules governing how the funding can be used are much less prescriptive. Funding is to be used for three Investment Priorities: Community and Place, Local Business, and People and Skills. Funding can be used for any combination of 41 defined Interventions within the three Investment Priorities.

The funds will be opening next week and are available to businesses, schools, towns and parishes, community groups and the voluntary sector on a first come first served basis. Please share this as widely as possible this is a great opportunity to get proper funding into our rural areas. Please check the Dorset Council website for the information there isn't a link for me to send just yet.

Planning update

As of the 6th December central government has agreed an increase in planning fees to reflect the true cost of determining an application. Fees will rise by 30% for major applications and 25% for other applications. The increase in fees come with an expectation on councils to make decisions in a timely manner. Decision times are being reduced from 23 weeks to 16 weeks with immediate effect on all applications paying the new rates. Failure to determine in the new timescale will result in a refund of the application fee.

Dorset Council is one of the largest planning authorities in the country and receives over 4000 applications every year. As previously mentioned in my reports recruitment continues to be a problem with considerable competition from the private sector. Our Building Control section is rated very highly and although we compete with private sector, we service over 70% of the market due to the good service provided. Currently there are 33 towns and parishes which have a neighbourhood Plan.

Budget

We are predicting that our end of year figure will be a £15M overspend on a total revenue budget of £361M. The bulk of the overspend has been due to the high rates of inflation during the year running at over 10%. Construction materials for our highways for example have risen by over 20%. Our budget for 24/25 will require savings across the council of £22M to be made in efficiencies in year. We are determined not to cut services but to look at ways of working differently to make the savings. It will mean that there will need to be some staff cuts as we streamline services.

We are assuming that inflation will run at 3.2% in the coming year. 1% variance inflation causes + or - £2.8M difference to Dorset Councils budget. The recently announced raise in the National Living Wage will be managed through our inflation assumptions. The draft budget is assuming that we will take the 3% increase in council tax and 2% increase in the Adult Social Care precept. It is disappointing that we did not receive any additional funding from central Government in the autumn statement and as a rural area council we are challenging central Government that the formula for funding is wrong and does not take into consideration the additional costs that a very rural area brings to the council. It makes me personally very cross that we are penalised in this way when London boroughs with much more business rates in their budgets get as much as quadruple the grant which Dorset receives.

Childrens services update

Dorset Council has 460 children in care of which some 66 are unaccompanied asylum seekers. The numbers of Dorset children in care are reducing and dropped 75 last year to this year. However, our costs remain the same as our provider costs have escalated this year partly due to inflation but also because some of the providers are to be quite frank making money for their shareholders from this area as they know there is insufficient provision. Some are showing profits of £500M in the last year. We are working hard to create our own children's accommodation in Dorset with four new sites opened this year to help control these costs. Some of the children in care have extremely high-cost placements because of their high needs. The NHS has closed all the mental health beds for level 4 the most complex cases and this has pushed these children out into council care. Our most expensive case costs over £60,000 a week! Our costs in this area have increased over 1000% in the last 5 years.

The key to controlling the costs is to know the children of our area and to provide support and help as early as possible. To help make our services accessible we are developing family hubs across the area with two opened this year and two more

scheduled to open next year. We currently are working providing early help with some 1500 children to help keep them safe and well living with their own families. The council supports 7102 children with special needs, 601 children being home educated and importantly 295 young adults as care leavers. The service obviously also works closely with our schools and colleges, both council run, church schools and academies.