

Report to Parishes
Dorset Council
Hill Forts and Upper Tarrants Ward

Cllr Sherry Jespersen

Summer 2021

As we head into high summer, we are still awaiting the end of lockdown restrictions and the return to something like normal life. I anticipate that all meetings will be able to be held “in real life” soon and I am looking forward to seeing you all again, not framed by a computer screen.

Face to Face Service Points Re-open

Dorset Council Customer Service points reopened from 5th July. Throughout lockdown many more people have been accessing Dorset Council services via the website or by phone and the “digital first” strategy remains a priority. But there will always be some users who need face to face support. Help with council services is available from Nordon Lodge in Blandford, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 10.00am to 4.00pm. Generally, there will be pre-booked appointments, and Covid regulations will be in place to keep everyone safe.

Planning

Work continues the Dorset Local Plan. The first consultation, which took place earlier this year, received over 60,000 comments from a good cross section of residents. All these comments are being considered and it is hoped that they will be published on the council’s website before the end of July. The reviewed Plan is now due to be published early next year and is still on track for submission to the Secretary of State in May 2022 for public examination by the Planning Inspectorate and adoption in 2023.

The number of houses allocated to Dorset under the national methodology remains the most challenging aspect of the plan, and Dorset Council and Dorset MPs have lobbied on this. However, it was interesting to note that, on a recent visit to Bournemouth, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government gave indication that he intended to give way on this issue.

Meanwhile, Dorset Council Planning Department, like many others around the country, has been dealing with a massive increase in the number of planning applications. This is apparently in part due to a boom in the DIY and home extensions resulting from a year of working from home. The Council has tried to manage this extra workload, including by appointing new officers, contracting out what it can and introducing streamlined processes. Nonetheless, there is a significant backlog and applications are taking longer to be decided.

The new planning software continues to be rolled out and I have not forgotten that the Council agreed to take note of the various issues raised by Parishes at the end of the roll-out.

Bus Services

In response to the Government's new National Bus Strategy, which aims to improve bus services, Dorset Council is developing a Bus Service Improvement Plan in collaboration with local bus operators, community groups and passengers. The Improvement Plan will look at networks and services, fares and ticketing and passenger facilities. It is not clear, however, whether there is any opportunity to introduce new bus services in rural north Dorset or reintroduce services closed long since by the former County Council. I will be taking this up with the portfolio holder.

Bin Collection Round Changes

Around 34,000 households in north Dorset had their bin collection days changed at the start of June. The new rounds were designed using data from the live vehicle tracking system and local knowledge from the crews and drivers and involved purchase of some new vehicles. 34,000 households were written to directly with clear information, as well as numerous electronic reminders. Bar a few teething problems this process seems to have gone very smoothly. It will result in increased reliability and cost savings on vehicle use and more efficient round configuration.

Summer Road Maintenance

Over the summer, Dorset Highways will carry out a rolling programme of premium surface dressing on large sections of A and B roads, to protect them from water damage and keep them in good condition for longer. Many of these roads have already had patching work completed to repair structural defects in preparation for this resurfacing. Drivers are advised to allow extra time because convoy working will slow traffic. After the work is finished an advisory 20mph limit is in place while the stone chippings are further embedded by passing vehicles. Crews return after 48 hours to remove excess chippings.

Rural Broadband

Dorset Council and local Parishes are calling for more national action to ensure the most rural areas get improved broadband. Although 96% of Dorset can get superfast broadband, the remaining 4% struggle with basic online and without national intervention these 8,000 homes and businesses will remain left behind because getting fibre to these “not spots” can cost tens of thousands of pounds. In its response to a government call for evidence on broadband in hard to reach areas , Dorset Council has also called for changes to the Universal Service Obligation to allow anyone with sub-superfast broadband to apply for the subsidy of £3,400 currently only available to premises with speeds less than 10Mbps.

New Police and Crime Commissioner

David Sidwick is the new Police and Crime Commissioner for Dorset and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole. Several his priorities are particularly relevant to our area, including rural crime and rural roads. As a member of the Police and Crime Panel I will be able to work closely with the PCC and I will use this opportunity to try and ensure sufficient police time and resource is allocated to rural areas. Cllr Jane Somper, in neighbouring Beacon Ward, and I have invited David to meet some of our Community Speed watch leaders and Parish Councillors in September. I will send further details in due course.

Community Recovery Grants

There is still time to apply for help from the Dorset Council Community Recovery Grant scheme which can provide small grants to community organisations which have not been able to operate under Covid. Details of eligibility criteria and how to apply can be found on the Dorset Council website.

Keeping in Touch

As always, there is a mass of useful information on the Dorset Council website. Council meetings, for now still virtual, are live streamed and recorded for the general public to view and agendas and the Cabinet Forward Plan are published in accordance with the regulations. And I am always available to offer any further help and advice, on cllrsherry.jespersen@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk.
