

Report to the parish council 7/2/2025

Cllr Jill Haynes Chalk Valleys Ward

Dear Clerks, councillors and members of the public,

January always seems a long and depressing month and it felt the same way at the council! There have been numerous overview and scrutiny meeting looking at different parts of the new budget proposals for 2025/26 as well as what changes will need to be made through the Our Future Council programme to make the savings needed going forward. In truth there is very little wriggle room and the changes made by Central Government last December have hit the council hard, in addition we have heard that there is a freeze on Environment Agency spend and so no money for the urgent works on both West Bay and Weymouth harbour walls. (A potential cost to the council of £5M.) Meanwhile our demand continues to grow in Adult Social Care and Children's services despite some excellent prevention work.

Therefore, coming to Full Council next week will be the administration's proposals to cut costs and provide additional income to close the current £49M budget gap. The papers set out a total budget of £416M and this will put an additional £40M into those demand services but requires cuts elsewhere to cover the increase.

It is proposed to take the full Council tax and Adult Social Care increases which come to 5% and will mean the cost for a band D property will be £2101.05 pa. Out of 186917 households 71% are bands A-D. Nearly 22000 receive council tax support and a surprising 60,000 homes receive the single person discount. With the two figures above the council income is greatly decreased but on the plus side we do have very good collection rates.

This figure puts Dorset Council in the top three most expensive council tax authorities, but we also receive some of the lowest Government funding. This year our Revenue Support Grant from central government is just £179K down from £700K last year. If you compared us per head of population to the support given to the likes of Liverpool City Council we would be receiving a staggering £100M, the formula for the grant is so unfair.

Dorset Council share of Business rates is £48M. (the remainder goes to central Government) There is also a budget contingency of £13M to cover some of the variables we need to manage. For example, pay – a 1% variation on what we predict will cost the council plus of £1M. We don't negotiate the pay deals this is done nationally, and you will have seen already some of the pay deals agreed by the current government! Also a business rate growth of 6% has been included but with the current drop in business confidence this may be a big ask, hence the contingency.

Looking at some of the cuts and changes proposed it is likely that there will be a reduction of about £600,000 in our highways budget. There will be a review of held vacancies but the bulk of these will be removed. The proposals show £14.4M in cuts, it will also mean that there will be likely redundancies across the council although there is always potential for redeployment as teams and workloads are reviewed.

You will remember Dorset Council is now charging extra council tax to second home owners and at the time this was agreed there was an amendment to have 40% of this additional money ring fenced for affordable housing. (Predicted to be £1.4M pa) I am shocked to understand that the bulk of this money is going towards existing staff costs in the housing section. While they do a great job supporting people to stay in their homes and filling up empty properties this is not what I thought would happen to the money, their costs should be in the base budget. I was hoping that we would use this to support the actual building of properties through Community Land Trusts.

There appears to be a considerable drive on asset disposals to cover the budget shortfall, but I always have concerns about selling off the family silver. Disposals will need to be carefully reviewed to ensure we don't save more money by repurposing them because once they're gone they are gone!

There is a proposal to charge for overnight parking in all our car parks. This could potentially bring in £200K but that is before the enforcement costs. It seems to me a very small amount of money for a lot of angst in our towns, with the current high costs that families are experiencing where are people supposed to park?

It is also proposed to half the £200K youth grant to £100K. This money supports our youth clubs and activities for young people in our communities and seems a strange and shortsighted thing to cut when it has such a positive impact.

I have looked closely at the budget report and there does not appear to be a budget line for the Climate and Nature emergency. If the administration are reducing the council's net zero date to 2035 then there will be a cost to do this, but funding does not appear to have been allocated. This will be a question for full council next week.

Finally, we heard this week that the council was not successful in the application to Government for a devolution deal. We have been working with Wiltshire, Somerset and BCP to create a Combined Authority. As I explained in my last report this does come with the extra bureaucracy of an elected mayor and their office but had the potential to bring in infrastructure funding to the area. On the whole I feel it is probably a good thing that we are not in the first wave of these combined authorities and will give us time to learn from the mistakes of others.