

Report to the parish council 19/12/24
Cllr Jill Haynes Chalk Valleys Ward

Dear Clerks, councillors and members of the public,
Please find my report for Dorset Council for the end of the year. It has been a time of considerable change with both a new government and a new administration at Dorset Council. We are now starting to see some of the changes central government are looking to make and to be quite honest none of it looks very favourable to rural areas.

Budget 2025/6

Last week we held a budget day to try to understand what the changes will mean to Dorset Councils budget. We understand that next financial year we just get a single year settlement but from 26/7 onwards they will be multi -year – possibly three years at a time which at least helps with continuity planning. There are some areas we are going to lose funding and some positives. All the figures we are talking about at the council are very large and it is sometimes difficult to comprehend the challenge to balance a budget of this size.

We have already been told that we will be losing the Rural Services Delivery Grant of £3.2M. This was to help with the extra costs associated with delivering services in a rural and sparsely populated area. This will be a big blow to the council.

We should be gaining £2.9M to help the NHS with adult's social care discharges.

We hope to have a new prevention grant of £1M in Children's Services, but this has yet to be confirmed

The Extended Producer Responsibility legislation is all about packaging waste and now producers will have to pay for the collection and removal/recycling of that waste rather than the council doing this at a cost to the taxpayer. This will save the council about £7M

We are anticipating a New Homes Bonus as a one-off grant of £3.2M. The bulk of this will go to our housing association partners to help provide social housing.

You will have seen the employer rise in National Insurance contributions in the budget this is going to be covered for the council for this year by a Government grant of about £4M. However, it does not cover the additional cost to our suppliers which I'm sure they will want to pass onto the council, and this equates to a cost increase of about £6M.

Each year the council reviews the actual cost to provide our statutory services and those demand lead services like Adult Social Care and Children's social care.

This year the current administration is looking to set a budget of £380M for the whole council. Within this budget there is increased spend in the following areas:

***£15M into Adult Social care**

A 10% increase in the spent to reflect the additional 500 people who needed these services this year bringing a total receiving services to some 4400. This is one of our biggest areas to control spend and we have such an elderly population, however, through good preventative work we have managed to bring down the predicted spend of £210M to £175M still scary figures!

***£4M for children's services. (5% increase)**

Since 2022 we have managed to reduce the number of children in care by 90 Children and our total number of children in care now is 385 – this includes foster care. This prevention work and working early on with families has provided cost avoidance of at least £6M and the councils children's services are considered an exemplar in the country.

***£4M for place-based services. (4% increase)**

This includes our roads and waste collection services and as more houses are built so the cost of providing these services increases.

We transport 7800 children daily to school!! The budget for our school transport including SEND (special needs) children is a hugely scary £40M. For years this budget has been extremely difficult to control, and the budget has risen year on year. This year after some

excellent collaborative work across the directorates there is a £1M underspend on the budget. I believe we are the only council in the country to have gained control of this part of the budget. In addition, the administration is looking to put aside an additional £18M to use for contingency and adding headroom to reserves.

The Council is still awaiting the confirmation of the government settlement but with the ballpark figures above the administration are looking a budget gap of about £49M for next year.

The way this gap will be addressed will be part of the budget setting process in January when the council have had confirmation of the government figures. Areas to be covered will include possible savings from prevention work across the council, income generation, commercial opportunities and a review of services provided.

The budget process is never easy but despite all the good work this year looks like it is going to be one of the most difficult I have ever encountered.

Devolution Deal

It looks as if the council is likely to progress with a submission for a Devolution Deal. Dorset is looking to work with Somerset and Wiltshire councils to form a “Heart of Wessex Mayoral Strategic Authority” following the release of the Devolution White Paper. This is likely to bring increased investment and funding to our council areas and see additional powers handed down to the region from central government. However, the Government are insisting that this comes with another layer of bureaucracy, and we will be expected to have an elected Mayor and a mayors office for the region.

Chief Executive is leaving us.

After many years at both West Dorset District Council and then as the CEO of Dorset Council Matt Prosser is leaving us to take up a new role as CEO of Wellington Council New Zealand. Matt has always been a champion for Dorset and successfully led us through local government reorganisation to form a unitary council. I wish him every success in his new job on the other side of the world.

It only leaves me to say a Merry Christmas to everyone and a peaceful and prosperous New Year.

Best wishes Jill