**Gillingham Ward Monthly Report**

 **Cllr Belinda Ridout – April 2022 - UPDATED**

**Love your Verge** – Dorset Council and Litter Free Dorset will once again be encouraging residents and visitors to Dorset to celebrate Dorset’s roadside verges as havens for biodiversity and wildlife with the ‘Love Your Verge’ campaign. Changes to verge management in Dorset include an increase in ‘cut and collect’ mowing – a technique which helps to reduce the soil fertility over time, creating a better environment for wildflowers to grow. The council has also reduced verge cutting throughout the rural road network to once instead of twice per year, where it is safe to do so. This allows more flowers to complete their life cycles before being cut. Littering causes major issues for plants and wildlife and cleaning up discarded rubbish is costly and time-consuming. Look out for colourful signage installed on verges around the county.

**Disability employment** – residents with a disability will receive more support to get into work and expand their horizons with a new three-year partnership between the council and national disability employment specialists, Pluss. People with learning or physical disability, autism or mental health needs, will receive bespoke support to search for, secure and retain employment. Assistance ranges from CV creation and work experience to practical help like navigating public transport. The aim is to help 50 people through the partnership.

**Climate change -** Newly installed solar panels at two Dorset Council waste depots (Crookhill, Chickerell and Poundbury, Dorchester) are already producing over 200,000 kWh of renewable energy each year and providing most of each building’s power needs. The Crookhill site produces enough equivalent to power 36 homes and saving around 30 tonnes of carbon emissions. Recent sunny days have seen the whole Crookhill site running purely on solar-generated electricity. The Poundbury panels generate more power than the site needs, the surplus being automatically fed into the national grid and save around 18 tonnes of CO2 annually. Similar panels have already been installed in schools, libraries (Gillingham library has recently had an impressive array of solar panels installed) and leisure centres as part of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme, which saw Dorset Council awarded with £19m of central government funding to make publicly owned buildings more energy efficient. The work includes installation of heat pumps, LED lighting and improved building management systems at various Dorset Council sites and buildings across the county.

If you run a business or a public/community sector organisation, Low Carbon Dorset, may be able to help you improve your energy efficiency and increase your use of renewable energy. More information at **Lowcarbondorset.org.uk.**

**Response to the Ukrainian crisis** – the Dorset Together network is coordinating and facilitating the support for Ukraine across the county. The network is currently working to prepare a warm welcome for Ukrainian refugees coming to Dorset. Help & Kindness (a local community interest company) is signposting people to local groups supporting refugees and sharing information. The council’s role to support Ukrainian refugees ranges from accommodation checks, education provision for children, arranging for payments and job-seeking opportunities.

**Dorset Centre of Excellence – opening of Coombe House (formerly known as St Mary’s, Shaftesbury)** – the Council has been very busy behind the scenes, getting ready for the opening of the new Coombe House School, nr Shaftesbury. The new school will offer facilities tailored to supporting pupils with Special Education Needs & Disabilities (SEND). Work has been underway for many months to adapt the premises to meet SEND requirements and a refresh of the classrooms in anticipation of welcoming the first 50 pupils this term. (The school will ultimately be able to cater for up to 280 pupils.) The next stage will be an inspection by Ofsted which will be required in order to complete the school’s registration with the Department for Education. Its great to think that this excellent facility is right here on our doorstep.

 **£16m annual road maintenance programme** – proactive road maintenance activity intensifies in the spring due to many road treatments needing dry and/or warm weather. The busy tourist areas being worked on first before the start of the summer season. This financial year, the Department for Transport funding dedicated to carriageway maintenance in the council year will be £11.6m. Dorset Council Cabinet awarded a further £6.7m into highway maintenance, with around £4.6m being invested in proactive, planned road repairs. This year in the Dorset Council area, around 1.4million-square-metres of road will be repaired, including roughly 434,000m2 of resurfacing (rebuilding layers to restore strength and shape), 446,000m2 of surface dressing (seals roads from water damage and restores skid resistance), 200,000m2 of micro-surfacing (filling in shallow cracks and holes on minor roads forming part of the National Cycleway Network), 75,000m2 of in-situ recycling (reconstructing minor roads with poor construction but often taking heavy vehicles), 100,000m2 of preservation (preventative treatment for busy, good condition routes, stopping water ingress and surface deterioration) and 60,000m2 of patching. Road maintenance is all very high tech these days, where images are collected on a mobile device mounted on the windscreen of highway vehicles. These images are downloaded and run through artificial intelligence systems that convert them into defect data and provide an overall condition assessment of the road. Asset management systems then identify schemes for the different treatment options available. The information is used by highways engineers, along with the designation and rural nature of the road, to consider the treatment options and prioritise roads for repair. Programmes of work are then put together to maximise efficiency and secure the best rates. Dorset Highway’s maintenance approach – to carryout repairs specific to the damage evidenced in the individual road – enables maintenance to be caried out on more roads, reduce emissions by using less raw material and create less waste compared to solely using resurfacing. I was very impressed with the re-use policy for the Principal Road running through the southern extension of Gillingham. Hardly any raw material was carried off site during construction. Most being re-used on site or used by local farmers, amounting to huge savings in carbon emissions. If anyone is interested there are facts and figures for this site which are impressive.

Wishing you all a great May Bank Holiday.

**Cllr. Belinda Ridout,**

**Councillor for the Gillingham Ward**

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**For those residents not on line, who have important questions or concerns, call Dorset Council on** **01305 221000, 8am to 8pm, 7 days a week or email:** **communityresponse@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk****. All minutes of meetings can be found on the Dorset Council website: https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk**