**Beacon Ward Report to Parishes**

**Dorset Council**

**Cllr Jane Somper**

2023 JAN-MARCH

**Dorset Council Budget Setting**

Dorset Council’s budget of £348m for 2023-24 has been approved by councillors at the Full Council meeting on 14 February. This continues the council’s commitment to maintain frontline services, without the need for reductions in services to balance the budget. Dorset Council provides around 450 different services to just under 380,000 residents. This year’s budget setting exercise took place against a national background of extreme pressures for councils. These pressures include the high level of inflation which affects the cost of delivering council services particularly in a rural county, and also the continued growth in need for social care services as a result of the ageing population in Dorset.

Council tax will increase next year by just under 2% and the adult social care precept by 2%. This is less than the maximum 5% increase available to councils, as outlined in the Government’s Spending Review in December 2022. The increase is equivalent to £1.40 extra per week for a Band D property. This is a balanced budget in a national context of significant financial challenge. Our overriding aim has been to protect the essential frontline council services on which local residents and businesses rely. The proposals do include a council tax increase; however, we have kept to it to the minimum possible despite the high level of inflation and we continue to provide a range of support for those residents hardest hit by the cost of living.

Since becoming a unitary council in 2019, we have made efficiency savings of £76 million. This money has been reinvested to protect frontline services including Adult and Children’s SEN Services. The prudent budget management has meant that Dorset has not faced the same reductions to essential services as many other areas. However, the leader continues to lobby Government for fairer funding for Dorset so that we can reduce the burden on local taxpayers in future

**Cost of Living Help**

Dorset Council have set aside **£2M** from our reserves to help residents with the cost-of-living crisis. This is a one-off allocation and we will use this to target financial support in the short-term and include some longer-term solutions to issues such as the challenge of energy costs for residents through property improvement schemes. More details next month.

**Do you qualify for financial assistance?**

Qualifying for benefits can not only unlock income but could lead to additional assistance where outgoings become reduced. Even if you think you are not entitled to any assistance or have previously applied, you should still check if you haven’t done so recently. It takes a few minutes and could have an impact on your day-to-day life. Below are just some examples of where our Welfare Benefits Team has helped residents.

An older council resident who did not qualify for Pension Credit due to his assets, was entitled to the highest rate of Disability Living Allowance where once he had a lower amount. The rebanding of this benefit unlocked £92 a week in income, which in turn allowed him to claim Pension credit, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support totalling £220 a week. The entitlements also led to a free TV licence, reduced tariff utility bills, assistance with glasses, dental treatment and hospital transport. The resident also got access to technological devices in his home to notify others if he fell.

In another example, a resident with a learning disability who was assisted with a benefit check when her circumstances changed, was owed tens of thousands of pounds due to previous unanswered claims from the Department of Work and Pensions. This led to an additional £180 benefits which unlocked Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support, assistance with glasses, free dental treatment and prescriptions as well as hospital transport.

The children of families with changing circumstances may be able to benefit from free school meals if they qualify for certain benefits. In addition, school holiday activities may become available and some after school activities become free. The qualifying benefits includes Income Support, income-based Jobseeker’s Allowance, Child Tax and some Working Tax credits. Qualifying criteria here: <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/w/free-school-meals>

**Care Leaver Support accommodation**

Dorset Council is inviting private landlords to work in partnership with them to provide good quality accommodation for young people leaving the care of the council. At an event in Dorchester on 1 November, representatives from Dorset Council told landlords that in exchange for letting out their property to a care leaver, they could expect a guaranteed deposit, rent in advance and regular, guaranteed rent payments for the first 12 months of tenancy. Care leavers receive statutory support until they are 21 and this can be increased to 25 depending on their circumstances.

Currently, Dorset has 526 care leavers (data from June 2022), some looking to set up their first home, with practical and financial support, and moving-in kits provided by Dorset Council. Each tenant also has a dedicated worker who will liaise with the landlord to ensure the tenancy is a success. The council also equips the young care leavers with essential life skills such as tenancy readiness, being a good neighbour and budgeting.

If you are a landlord and interested in finding out more, please contact our Care Leavers Team on 01202 868257 or email clopportunities@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk for a no obligation chat.

**Illegal Puppy Farm**

A judge has given a pair of convicted illegal puppy sellers just 3 months to pay over £150,000 or risk up to 18 months in prison. All the puppies rescued were brought back to full health and successfully rehomed via a well-recognised animal rescue charity. The pair pleaded guilty to causing unnecessary suffering to a protected animal, failing to take steps to ensure the needs of animals were met and carrying out a dog breeding and selling business for 14 months without a licence.

Dorset Council are set to receive 37% of the confiscation order funds, which amounts to £55,440.  This will go into the Community and Public Protection budget to be spent for the benefit of the community on general prevention and enforcement measures. The rest is split between central government and the HM Courts & Tribunals Service.

**Digital Champions**

A free training programme has now recruited and trained 750 special advisors to help Dorset’s digitally excluded residents get online. Called the ‘Embedded Digital Champion (EDC) programme, the Dorset Council-run course aims to train 1,000 of the county’s frontline workers by 2023. This is to help make sure no one is left behind in an increasingly digital world. Previous surveys have revealed that nearly a third of Dorset residents lack the skills, devices, or connectivity to be online.

Since the start of the programme, 750 embedded digital champions have been recruited from places such as GP surgeries, libraries, voluntary organisations, and housing associations.

The EDC training takes place entirely online and is available to anyone with a front-line role who regularly encounters Dorset residents who struggle to be online. Topics such as password security, accessibility features, setting up email accounts and more are covered. Many people who have completed the course, have reported that their own digital skills have improved, as well as their confidence when supporting others

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**Gold award for DC Armed Forces support**

A [Gold Award](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-employer-recognition-scheme/defence-employer-recognition-scheme) has been given to Dorset Council as part of the Ministry of Defence Employer Recognition Scheme at a recent Official Ceremony in Dartmouth. Representing the highest badge of honour, the MoD bestows the Gold Award to businesses and organisations which go the extra mile to demonstrate their commitment to aiding and employing members of the military community. The council previously held a silver award, bestowed in 2021.  To achieve the Gold Award, the council has developed a number of initiatives to encourage and support employees who are veterans, reservists, and cadet force adult volunteers, as well as spouses and partners of those serving in the Armed Forces.

Achieving the Gold Award is part of Dorset Council’s pledge through the [Armed Forces Covenant](https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/your-community/armed-forces-covenant/what-is-the-armed-forces-covenant) to ensure those who serve, or have served, in the Armed Forces, and their families, are treated with fairness and respect in their communities, economy and society.

**Still time to get flu and covid vaccines**

Public Health Dorset is working with health colleagues to urge eligible people who haven’t had their COVID-19 or flu vaccines to do so. Cases of flu and other respiratory viruses remain high in the community. The best way to stay protected from flu and COVID-19 is to get vaccinated. First, second and booster doses of the COVID-19 vaccine are still available in Dorset, and some residents are also eligible for a seasonal booster. Information about how to get yours is available by visiting [COVID-19 vaccination service (dorsethealthcare.nhs.uk)](https://www.dorsethealthcare.nhs.uk/covid-19-vaccination-service). Lots of residents can get a free flu jab such as people aged over 65, pregnant women, and residents living with long term health conditions. All primary school children and some secondary school children are eligible for the flu nasal spray vaccination this year, which is usually given at school. Information about school immunisations can be found by visiting: [www.dorsethealthcare.nhs.uk/schoolageimms](https://www.dorsethealthcare.nhs.uk/schoolageimms)

Parents and carers of children aged 2 and 3 are encouraged to get a free vaccine for their child. This flu vaccine is also a nasal spray with no needles involved.

Most young children will not have encountered flu yet, particularly as it was largely kept at bay by COVID-19 restrictions in the past few years. This means they will not have built up any natural immunity to the virus, so it is particularly important for them to get a flu vaccine this year.

Dorset residents can find out more about who is eligible for the flu vaccine and how to get one by visiting [www.nhs.uk/flu](http://www.nhs.uk/flu)

**20mph**

After months working with the Parish and Dorset Council Road Safety Team, I’m delighted that my suggestion for Fontmell Magna to have a MAX SPEED 20 sign to slow down vehicles as they approach the first sharp bend heading north along the A350 has now been installed. Great team work.