

February report from Dorset County Council

The budget settlement from the Government has been incredibly late this year. We have to agree a balanced budget for the next financial year and this has to be in place for the end of March. We would normally expect to know what our funding was going to be some time before Christmas but this year we did not get the final figures until last Thursday! The initial indication about two weeks ago, from the new formula, gave Dorset the worst/ lowest funding in the country. We had anticipated that in the next financial year we would have to make savings of £13M. When the figures first came out it looked as if we would have to find another £7.3M on top of this figure. We spent a lot of time in the following weeks with Greg Clark and his team as well as all the Dorset MP's protesting at the unfairness of the new system. There appeared to be a note of horror that the effect of the changes were so dramatic on rural counties. The final settlement provided Dorset some transitional relief and also the rural services grant was increased. This still left us with a shortfall of £3.3M and additional savings have been found which we have now agreed subject to the full council meeting on 15 February. The figures for 2017/18 are even more difficult. However the Government has agreed that there has to be a proper review of need across the councils in the country before the business rate retention becomes a reality in 2020. It seems incredible that these changes are not fully worked through before they are put in place.

One of the cuts that has been agreed to balance the budget is the removal of the members' local budgets. This has been a success for many parishes but it is felt that the little money we now are receiving should be concentrated on our statutory obligations. I am no longer able to take requests for funding although those already agreed but not paid will go through.

You will be aware that we are changing our youth service provision. We are some £3M overspent on the children's budget and this is because we have so many 10 to 14 year olds coming into care. Currently we have about 440 young people in care against a norm of five years ago of about 350. It is essential that we start to tackle this problem at the cause and start to work with much younger children and their families. The decision was made to get our youth workers to liaise and work with primary schools to identify families and children that need early help. They need to be out in the community and not necessarily waiting for young people to come in to youth clubs to see them. The County Council will no longer operate youth centre buildings that it owns and these are being offered to the local communities. We are very encouraged by the response and it looks as if all but one of the buildings have either schools or the community interested in taking on the youth club service. It will be of benefit to these communities if it can work as many of the buildings were only open in the evenings and not every day of the week. There could be many more opportunities for them to be used by local people. Other youth clubs that the county funds the youth workers will have to become self sufficient for the hours the youth club is open. There will be a restructure of qualified youth workers to align them with the schools in the community which will be completed by the beginning of September.

We are looking to work in a much closer way with the health services in order to not only make savings in management but also to make the experience one of a single service for people needing care and support. This is still a difficult discussion with partners as people are protecting their own part of the service and, of course, their jobs. However it is essential that this kind of co-operative working is moved forward quickly. Certainly in my role I have seen a big change in attitude even in the last three months.

The County Council will be moving to a new way of commissioning our adult social care services starting in September. We are in discussions with our domiciliary care providers to try to work to an outcomes based framework. This will bring much greater flexibility to the visits that carers make to people and should give them a greater say in the package of support that they receive. This is early days for this change and I will give further updates as things firm up.

If agreed at the Council meeting on 15 February, we will be going to a new committee system from May. Currently the three main committees are rather silos in their way of working: environment, children and Adults and communities. We now look to work across the directorates in a way that gives a greater integration and understanding of the whole of the activities undertaken by DCC. The new committees will also have the scrutiny role and the audit and scrutiny committee will cease. The audit role will move to the governance committee. The new committees will be Economic growth, People and Communities and Safeguarding.

The devolution agenda continues to be one of great discussion and of course it makes complete sense to look at less councils to save money. This is not simply going to one massive council for all of Dorset but much more about what areas should be within the decision of residents locally and what services need to be county wide in order to have economies of scale, eg roads or adult social care. The discussions will be helped by the Local Government Association advisors who are working with all the councils for free to provide a series of possible options that could be more cost effective while still providing local representation. I hope to get representatives from the parishes I cover together shortly to discuss how rural parishes will have a voice in the future.

As you can see there is an awful lot going on and I have missed out many areas where change is also happening however I hope to catch up with you all shortly as we move forward with these big changes.

Mrs Jill Haynes

County Councillor for the Three Valleys Electoral Division