**Annual Report to Parishes…May 2021**

**Beacon Ward - Cllr Jane Somper**

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Who would have imagined a year ago that we will have experienced so much change and disruption to our own daily lives along with everyone across the world, no exceptions, no one untouched by the devastation of a global Pandemic, not even here in quiet rural North Dorset where we experience a different pace to towns and cities, where we know our neighbours, where time can sometimes seem to move slower than in built up areas, where we are governed by seasonal changes of the land, through the work of our cherished farmers, ploughing, planting and sowing, where the sight, sound and for me the smells of agricultural vehicles and hay bales signify a move from summer to autumn.

Looking out at our beautiful countryside it has often felt that we are isolated from the ills of the world, but we know that we have not been. We have sadly lost people in our villages though this Pandemic and it’s important to remember them and their families.

There have been positives and I am happy to acknowledge those with enthusiasm. Just look at how our communities all pulled together to help one another, to reach out to our neighbour, to enquire as to our health, whether we needed assistance with food shopping, with prescription collections, and above all we began to ask each other ‘how are you feeling’. With mental health becoming far more acceptable to discuss and to talk about and I am delighted that so many people have felt they can talk about their feelings because talking is key to getting help if needed or sometimes just making us feel better, knowing we are not alone, that there are people who care and who are willing to listen. So I hope we continue to learn, to change and embrace new ways of working and living and do not revert back to type, except for those things we love to do.

While we have all been busy in our villages with many more people putting their hands up to volunteer, Dorset Council has not been standing still in the most challenging of times for an organisation of its size to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the 376,480 people who live in approx. 178,000 dwellings.

North Dorset alone is home to approx. 88,530 people with 36,362 households. 5,705 businesses, with Agricultural, Forestry and Fishing being the largest business category (17.62%). 88.1% are micro-business, employing 0-9 people. That’s a great deal of people, businesses and homes all affected by what has occurred in the last year.

I think it is easy to dismiss Dorset Council and be critical and of course it gets things wrong, but it also gets much right dealing with an enormous range of issues for its 376.480 residents and 5,705 businesses. I have put in to context the enormity of what DC had to do in a very short space of time, showing it can be agile as it responded swiftly with its partners to the very clear seriousness and the well of anxiety and panic by creating a programme of seven workstreams. And all this with 2,500 members of staff all working remotely from home overnight.

* Contact Centre across multiple organisations
* Delivery network
* Food and Medicine Supply
* Community Support
* Mental Health and Wellbeing
* Digital
* Data

**MARCH 2020**

The Council knew there were 10,000 people in the community (which rose to a high of 18,000 in the Dorset area at one point) who had been told they should shield as they were considered to be clinically vulnerable. The enormous amount of work by Adults and Children’s teams along with colleagues in the NHS, local partners charities and direct from residents and Councillors cannot be underestimated. Everyone who needed assistance received it through an incredibly complex delivery system and using all the resources available to the Council. Staff from across the Council services were all part of delivering the essential items that our vulnerable residents needed.

The Council faced potential communication and awareness barriers. These were quickly and expertly addressed by the Communications Teams working together across all the partners to co-ordinate delivery on social media, traditional channels and bespoke communications for residents with specific needs.

**APRIL 2020**

During April resident needs changed from enquiries about food and general advice to concerns about medicine supply and request for help with chores (ie. dog walking). 375 highways vehicles were re-deployed, 250 people from DC, Dorset Public Health, Dorset CCG and five local volunteer organisations joined forces with a total pool of more than 1,000 volunteers across the Dorset Council area, all aiding where needed.

DC Highways crews took the surprise decision to deliver Easter eggs in all the food boxes leading up to Easter, I know how much this was appreciated.

**MAY 2020**

Loneliness and mental health became a focus from the contacts received into DC along with the continued contact for food, medicine, chores and general advice. The project team expanded to 2,500 volunteers including colleagues from Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Services and DC Housing Services in order to meet safeguarding plans to support residents who members of the team had an awareness of but whom DC had not received contact from or managed to contact themselves, ie. people that there were concerns about.

**JUNE 2020**

The work of DC settled down a little as the Lockdown eased but some areas had to deal with issues relating to the large numbers of visitors. During this time the systems were consolidated, and time was given to prepare for any anticipated future restrictions.

A Local Outbreak Management Plan was developed to enable delivery in the future. Staff from Revenues and Benefits service were also added to the team in order to all work together providing financial support to residents.

Not only did this project create in three weeks a collaborative and partnership-led customer-focussed, service-delivery system to a scale that would have usually taken more than a year to negotiate, design and develop, DC sustained this service for four and a half months and these services were reinstated twice subsequently. In so doing, they have demonstrated to the people of Dorset how much their council cares for them, and to all employees of Dorset Council what can be achieved when boundaries are removed and we blend technology with people to solve extreme and urgent problems.

**COMMUNICATIONS DURING PANDEMIC**

21,000 outgoing calls were made and 13,900 incoming contacts were received across email, telephone and online, approximately 1 contact made every 2 operational minutes.

30,000 emails sent to extremely clinically vulnerable residents during 2020/21

**DORSET COUNCIL**

DC has provided over £259 million of Covid Government grants and support to local business since April 2020

DC has exceeded its target of providing affordable new-build homes

Due to DC’s speed of response to call for grants from Government the Council secured £19m to help deliver the climate and ecological emergency strategy

Dorset Children’s Services have developed ambitious plans to create a new school for SEND children and young people for approx. 280 pupils and a leading national Centre of Excellence at St Mary’s School. DC also announced an investment of £37.5m over the next 5 years, providing the best possible education for all Dorset SEND children and young people, St Mary’s is just one part of this.

**BEACON WARD WORK – Your Councillor**

During the last year my own workload increased significantly with enquiries from residents and Parish Councils coming in high numbers daily. Things did become quieter once the initial worries and concerns were dealt with. I want to be honest and tell you that at times I found it very challenging, and felt as isolated as everyone else as I, along with other councillors tried to make sense of what was happening and what help was available and how to access assistance for our residents. I had direct contact with members of the Cabinet who were dealing directly with decisions in order to gather information to disseminate to the Parishes. I felt I needed to get out and help where I could, volunteering to collect prescriptions through a brilliantly run system up in Shaftesbury and doing food shopping and other chores for residents.

99% of the correspondence and calls I received were all polite and simply seeking guidance, however it is a shame that some people felt that being confrontational and aggressive was acceptable, I’m afraid it isn’t and I told them so but at the same time I was aware that this is how some people found the world easier to cope with and calm was restored.

I was delighted to be asked to take on a new role as Lead Member for Children’s Safeguarding. The Children’s Directorate is ambitious and forward thinking and I have been impressed by all the staff I have met and spoken to in recent months. I was able to have one real-life visit to the CHAD (Children’s Advice and Duty Service). A fascinating day observing meetings and listening to calls as the team of Social Workers did their work, it was sobering listening to some of the issues. The service functions 24 hours a day 7 days a week and is where anyone who is concerned about a child or young person can put through a call or email the service who will follow this up and investigate.

I do not know how many virtual meetings I have attended but it must run well into hundreds and with a lot of screen time and much has been achieved. Holding meetings with Highways and Dorset Council Rangers Teams for the ward along with individual Parish issue meetings.

There have been huge numbers of planning applications coming in (double the amount normally received by the Planning Department) and I’ve spoken with planning officers on a range of topics, requesting site visits, expressing concerns over decisions, discussing delicate conservation and listed buildings applications.

There have been many positive moments and possibly the highlight was a recent problem involving nesting swans. No day is ever the same, I never know what is going to come up, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

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**REPORT – MAY 2021**

**Community Fund**

Bids are being invited for the £3m Community Renewal Fund, from a £220m Government Fund. DC are seeking applications for the fund specifically for projects that focus on supporting people and communities most in need across the UK through the following priorities:

Investment in skills. Investment for local business. Investment in communities and place. Supporting people in to employment.

Applicants must be able to deliver and complete the project up to 31 March 2022. Bids need to be submitted to DC by 21st May for appraisal. DC will prioritise a shortlist of projects to submit to Government who will assess all bids submitted by lead authorities against set criteria and the successful projects will be announced by the Government from late July 2021.

More information here:  <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/business-consumers-licences/economic-development/submit-a-bid-for-the-community-renewal-fund.aspx>

**Gigabit Broadband**

60 community buildings across rural North Dorset from Blandford to Sherborne; including schools, community centres, a health centre, council depots, farms and adult social care residential homes are to be connected to next generation, gigabit-capable broadband due to a fund allocation from the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership by March 2022

This follows a competitive tender process that I am delighted that Beacon Ward based, Wessex Internet has been awarded the contract to deliver full-fibre to these community buildings.

**Affordable Housing**

DC has exceeded its target for providing new-build affordable housing in the county over the last 12 months despite the very challenging conditions. With building sites restricted and materials in short supply, joint efforts have proven successful. The outstanding work by Housing Association partners pulling out the stops has meant that safe and affordable housing has been made available for the residents of Dorset.

Throughout the pandemic the council team has done excellent work to prevent homelessness and supporting people who are homeless into settled and more permanent housing. While there is still a lot of work to do, the current pipeline of development is delivering well with excellent work from Housing Associations such as Magna, Sovereign and Aster. The council is currently working up a new Housing Strategy which will identify where there are gaps or mismatches in the type of housing, or housing related services, available across the Dorset Council area.

**Virtual Council Meetings – High Court Ruling**

Due to the High Court decision last week, Town, Parish, Dirstrict, Unitary and Borough Councillors will need to return to physical meetings rather than carry on with virtual meetings after May7th.

I am very happy to be able to go back to face-to-face meetings again it is important. However, due to current covid-19 regulations and safety rules it is not possible to hold meetings involving all Dorset Councillors in any of the buildings they own and therefore these meetings cannot be held until June 21st, assuming regulations change when indoor meetings involving larger numbers are hopefully allowed again. Town and Parish Councils face the same issue.

Like many of the Parish Council Meetings, Dorset Council has moved its annual meeting forward to avoid the May 7th deadline (that is why I cannot be with you this evening as I have important meetings already scheduled and many of the PC meetings are now clashing).

I am disappointed and frustrated to not be able to attend any of the Annual PC meetings in my ward that have been brought forward as this is a vital part of my Ward role, where I provide information to PC’s and residents who attend and where they are able to ask me questions about Council business or matters of concern their village.

The Leader of DC, Cllr Flower states “Being able to hold Council Meetings virtually has been widely welcomed and a great success for Local Government during the pandemic. I am incredibly disappointed regarding the High Court ruling announced on Wednesday. Speaking to fellow Council Leaders across the country, we all agree that the Government should allow some flexibility in whether meetings are held in person, when social distancing rules allow, or remotely as has been the case for the past year. I am hoping that the Government will listen to the views of local government leaders and bring forward legislation as soon as possible so that virtual meetings can be part of the arrangements going forward. I understand that Parish and Town Councils are also being urged to respond to the legal ruling”