

Report to Parish Annual Meetings 2021

Hill Forts and Upper Tarrant's Ward

Cllr Sherry Jespersen

April/May 2021

A Year Like No Other

In March 2020, Dorset Council was less than a year old, with 82 new councillors, a new senior leadership team and a disparate workforce of 4,500 employees drawn from the six previous councils, based at different locations. The council had ambitious plans outlined in the first *Council Plan*, the *Climate and Ecological Emergency* plan, the transformation plans and the budget.

And then the Pandemic hit, and the council was called on to play a major part in the national crisis.

This report outlines how Dorset Council responded to Covid 19, while maintaining services, continuing to progress the transformation journey and establish the new council.

Dorset Council Staff

When Covid-19 hit, overnight 2,500 council staff began working from home, necessitating a steep learning curve and technology roll-out. The Planning Team, for example, found themselves working from home, unable to access archived files and dealing with 200 more planning applications each month than in the previous year. Who would have guessed that a pandemic would double the number of planning applications?

Meanwhile, 2,000 frontline staff continued to work directly with vulnerable residents, despite high levels of risk and uncertainty, particularly in the early weeks.

In a unique innovation Dorset Council set up what it called the "Skills Academy" to identify all the skills and experience its staff had to offer. 500 staff

volunteered to be redeployed into high priority services to provide much needed cover for colleagues who were shielding, sick or self-isolating. So, for example, staff from libraries helped with the all-important telephone helplines, staff from electoral services stepped in to deal with the excess death planning and Rangers helped re-open the HRCs. Highways vehicles were redeployed and highways crews, experienced drivers with a good knowledge of the area, delivered food boxes.

Community Shield

Working with partner organisations and volunteers Dorset Council's Community Shield coordinated provision of food, medicine and emotional support to individuals and families on the "shielded" list and others who were vulnerable. Council staff distributed emergency food, medicine and other urgent deliveries to vulnerable people – including a bed to one struggling family. In the early days of shielding, before national support was in place, council staff went to supermarkets to put together food parcels. Councillors worked with local supermarkets to influence them to support community needs.

When the government announced its *Everyone In* policy Dorset Council managed to accommodate all their rough sleepers in local hotels, within days.

Some Numbers

21,400 calls made to vulnerable residents

13,900 calls received – roughly one every two minutes at the height of the crisis

30,000 emails sent to clinically vulnerable residents

2,000 locally sourced food boxes packed and delivered by staff and volunteers

500 medicine pick-ups; 600 shopping trips; 150 other calls for help answered.

180 new food banks and other support groups created with volunteers.

Families and Children

Recognising that some young people might not have ICT at home during lockdown, the council ICT Team quickly reconditioned 200 laptops to give to

children. The council continued to provide free school meals vouchers, before the national policy was in place, and during August, ran a *Summer in Dorset* scheme offering free, daily, fun activities for over 3,500 vulnerably youngsters.

At Easter the Highways crew included Easter eggs in all their food boxes.

Dorset worked with local courts throughout the pandemic to enable virtual hearings, leading to better outcomes for children. This trailblazing approach has been recognised nationally.

Local Business

To support local suppliers during the crisis Dorset Council implemented daily payment terms rather than the usual 30 days. They made additional payments to foster carers and social care providers in recognition of the pressure they were under, including purchasing PPE.

The council distributed several different government grants to local businesses. Indeed, it is acknowledged that Dorset made more payments than most other councils and in better time. Staff worked fast to set up secure, digital processes to reach businesses quickly. **Since April 2020 Dorset Council has distributed £259million in Covid grants and support to local businesses.**

As the county came out of Lockdown last summer the reopening of tourism brought some problems to our county and Dorset Council staff and members were in the frontline in managing and cleaning up after the influx of visitors. For Summer 2021 Dorset has a major plan in place to welcome visitors but ensure they respect our places and our residents.

Carrying on with the Day Job

While the Covid crisis continued to absorb much of its time and resources Dorset Council still had to continue to deliver all its usual services. Services such as car parks and libraries were only closed if national Covid regulations required it. Work on the convergence of the former councils continued, staff recruitment and restructuring went ahead, and the all-important planning ICT project was kept on stream.

And despite this having been a year like no other Dorset Council can mark some significant achievements.

- The draft Dorset Local Plan went to consultation in January 2021, on target
 - The Climate and Ecological Emergency Plan was published, and Dorset Council secured an enormous grant of £19million to help deliver this
 - There is an ambitious plan to create a new special school for around 280 children and a leading Centre of Excellence, on the site of the newly acquired St Mary's, Shaftesbury.
 - £4.5m grant for the 5G Rural Dorset Project
 - An extra £9.1m from the Department for Transport to improve roads
 - £5m to extend the Low Carbon Programme, part of the work to tackle climate change
 - £1.6m extra to tackle homelessness
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There is no doubt that the impact of Covid on Dorset Council has been significant, not least in the unbudgeted expenditure across the year which was reflected in the rise in council tax earlier this year. And there is a backlog of work in some Directorates which will take time to clear and which is impacting on local people.

But overall, Dorset Council, backed by its local community, has done remarkably well in dealing with the challenges thrown up during this unprecedented year. In an independent *Residents' Satisfaction Survey* last Autumn, satisfaction with the council had increased across all the questions against the previous year.

I am quietly confident that Dorset Council can emerge from this baptism of fire a stronger, more confident organisation, better placed to realise an ambitious future on behalf of its residents.
