

County and District Councillor's report to Blackmore Vale Division Parishes and Towns – January 2014.

1. Local Plan Consultation Exercise and Neighbourhood Planning

During the month of December North Dorset District Council began the consultation exercise on the draft Local Plan as adopted by North Dorset District Council. I attended the first of the Consultation exercises held at Sturminster Newton and subsequently at the other market towns. The Sturminster Newton session on the 2nd December was well attended, with concerns being expressed in particular about the number of houses proposed, the impact of development on medical and educational facilities, the sewerage systems and the transport infrastructure. This stage of the consultation has now closed and the next stage is the Plan with all its supporting comments and documentation going on to the Planning Inspectorate via the Secretary of State for an examination in public. The revised document will then be formally signed off by the Secretary of State and become a North Dorset District Council Policy Document.

I have been attending meetings of the Sturminster Newton Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group who have applied to register the area of Sturminster Newton Town Council as a Neighbourhood Plan area. So far Sturminster is the only settlement in my Blackmore Vale Division to begin work on a Neighbourhood Plan. For the smaller parishes being covered by the Countryside Policy set out in the Local Plan is probably the most appropriate course of action and for others the decision of whether to undertake a Neighbourhood Plan yet has to be made.

2. Work as "Equality Champion" for Dorset County Council

As the nominated "Equality Champion" for Dorset County Council it is my responsibility to keep the importance of non-discriminatory treatment for the residents of Dorset in the forefront of the minds of policy makers and officers of Dorset County Council. That means that people receiving services from Dorset County Council should not be discriminated against on the grounds of age, gender, ability, race – or living in a rural area. I attend meetings with officers at County Hall, quarterly meetings of the Forum for Equality and Diversity which brings together representatives of voluntary agencies in wider Dorset, and monthly meetings of the Dorset Race Equality Council. I draw attention to the rurality point because I am concerned in particular at the impact of rural living and consequent lack of public transport on young people needing to access education, training or work and others who do not have their own forms of transport. Both the County and District Councils are committed to putting extra funds into Community Transport Schemes and coverage within the County is improving. Those are available to all residents needing to access medical, shopping and social facilities, including visiting friends and relatives. However in practice the schemes, which rely on volunteers willing to use their own cars, is generally only available in the daytime and unlikely to be willing to transport young people travelling without their parents or carers. The County is also supporting Car Clubs as I have previously mentioned, whereby people can join a club and have access to that club's car or cars. Sturminster Newton is working on the "Wheels to Work" scheme which aims to provide local young people with mopeds (plus insurance, helmets etc.) to get to training or employment for a reasonable weekly payment.

3. Budgets and Council Tax.

All local authorities are currently working on their annual budgets and consequently on the amount of money they will be asking each household for, and I have attended a number of meetings at County, District and Parish level during the past month, with more to go. Both County and District

are looking to save very large sums of money over the next three years without cutting services. Although the Council Tax Bill is sent out by North Dorset District Council the biggest proportion of that Bill goes to the County Council and the largest expenditure by the County Council now is services for the elderly, as I understand it. Increasingly the money for education, which has traditionally been a big spending area, goes directly to the schools as more become Academies and receive their funds straight from central government. Our highways are a nightmare at present and the money available to maintain them is tight and getting tighter. Yet so much of our rural way of life depends on roads to provide us with access to services. The deteriorating condition of our roads has been the main source of complaints made to me in the past month. The police and fire and rescue services also put in their bill as part of the Council Tax demand, and both services are having to make savings, one means of so doing being to look at reorganisation and the sharing of facilities with other areas.

4. **Dorset Community Action**

I am a member of the Board of Dorset Community Action (DCA), the voluntary body which serves as an umbrella organisation to support smaller voluntary groups in Dorset. I was nominated by North Dorset District Council. This normally means six weekly meetings. As local and central government retrench in their provision of services voluntary agencies are increasingly important as a way of filling the gaps, and providing “additionality” to basic government services. In particular DCA is able to help voluntary bodies ensure they are operating legally and effectively and also to help them find sources of funding, through consultancy and training.

5. **Apprenticeships Launch**

I was delighted to be asked to launch the Apprenticeship Scheme at Blandford School. The scheme aims to help pupils to find apprenticeship places to provide them with training and an income, as an alternative to fulltime education at college or university. The aim is to reduce the number of young people going into jobs without any training provision. North Dorset has a higher percentage of young people not going on to training or education hence the promotion of this scheme at Blandford. All young people are now required to be in either full time education or work with training until the age of 17, rising to 18 in 2015.

6. **Libraries**

I have two libraries in my County Division – Stalbridge which is now a Community Library reliant on voluntary support, and Sturminster Newton which is a core library with paid staff. I try to support both libraries and their staff as far as possible. I work closely with the Friends of Stalbridge Library, especially through the redoubtable Tim Lee, and I chair the Friends of Sturminster Newton Library. The future of Sturminster Newton Library cannot be taken for granted and the County continues to look to reduce the costs of its libraries. In the past month I have been involved in discussions about the future of the library in Sturminster and whether a better location can be found.

7. **Skateboarding and play equipment**

Although they neither pay Council Tax nor vote, our children and young people are our most important residents because they are the future of our communities. During the past month I have attended meetings of the Skateboard Park Working Party in Sturminster and of the working group to continue replacing the galleon play equipment in the Recreation Ground which has deteriorated in spite of the efforts of the Ground Staff. We hope that the play equipment will be replaced in the coming year. The work to achieve a Skateboard Park is a longer and more complex project

which we hope will lead to a good quality skateboard park being available to local young people in 2015. It has been a long time coming.

8. Blackmore Vale's links with South Sudan

The Church Deanery of Blackmore Vale has a partnership with the Diocese of Lui in South Sudan and I was pleased to help play host to Bishop Stephen Dokolo when he visited us last June. Sadly the war in South Sudan has now caught up with Lui, which is not a place of intertribal strife and not sitting on the oil fields. There has been fighting in the town of Lui and nearby towns but at the time of writing earlier today (6th Jan.) Bishop Stephen did not know the number of deaths. All local shops and markets have been looted and in some towns all the local people have fled to hide in the bush. These people had so little but they have lost even that. One of the primary schools in Lui has been taken over by the army. Projects which we locally were working on to improve the lot of the very very poor people of Lui, particularly educational projects, have to be put on hold until peace returns, however long that takes.

9. Christmas celebrations

Sadly the inclement weather conditions, i.e. howling gales and floods, deterred us from carol singing around Mappowder, which we normally do each year to raise money for charity, generally for the air ambulance which is so important for our rural area. However, being a local councillor and local resident did involve a lot of carol singing around the Blackmore Vale. I was very impressed by, and very much enjoyed, the late night shopping event in Stalbridge which brought together so many members of the community. Sturminster Newton's late night shopping event was spread over two Thursday nights and in spite of the efforts of the Chamber of Trade, Commerce and Hospitality, did not have the same buzz as that in Stalbridge. Discussions are already beginning about how Stur. can meet the challenge of the high standard set by Stalbridge in 2014.

10. Councillors Surgeries

I continue to hold monthly drop in surgeries in Glanvilles Wootton (9.30 a.m.), Pulham (10.30 a.m) and The Exchange (11.15 – 12.00 noon) on the first Saturday of each month; Thyme after Time Cafe at Hazelbury Bryan with the police 10.00 a.m. on the first Thursday of each month; Mappowder (9.00 a.m.), Hazelbury Bryan Village Hall (10.00 a.m.) and The Hub (11.15 – 12.00 noon) on the third Saturday of the month.

Pauline Batstone,
County and District Councillor
Blackmore Vale Division.
6th January, 2014.