

Gillingham Ward Monthly Report
Cllr Belinda Ridout – February, 2025

Wessex Mayoral Strategic Authority – the submission to government by Dorset, Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole, Somerset and Wiltshire Councils, to be part of the Government's Devolution Priority Programme, first round, was unsuccessful. However, all four councils are committed to continuing conversation to pursue devolution in the future.

Climate and Nature Recovery – updated goals for climate and nature were presented to the Place & Resources Overview Committee recently. Net-zero targets originally proposed when the Climate & Ecological & Emergency was declared by the Council in 2019 have been brought forward by five years. Net-zero has been brought forward to 2035 for the council and 2045 for the county.

The first draft of Dorset's **Local Nature Recovery Strategy** has been published, a co-produced plan aimed at restoring and enhancing nature across our county. This plan is the result of extensive collaboration with people and organisations from across Dorset. A public consultation is planned for the Spring. Something to look out for and I think we shall all have some input on this from our local areas. I have booked myself on a special webinar on 10th March, organized by the Planning Advisory Service, discussing some of the recent changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), how it will affect local authorities and what councillors can do in their role to support nature recovery. This sounds very interesting and I will report back. I am very keen to make sure that biodiversity mitigation is taken very seriously with every planning application submitted, including commercial, but also, most importantly, that biodiversity *enhancement* is also part of every planning application, e.g installing bird/bat boxes, hedgehog runs, etc. We must all do our best to encourage nature in all areas of development, particularly where no provision has been made before. The Portfolio Holder for Planning assures me that this is on his list to discuss with the head of planning.

Household Support Fund –this is a fund to help those less fortunate, distributing supermarket vouchers to those most in need and support for older people in the area, who are struggling even more this year since the removal of the automatic Winter Fuel Payments. It is good to know that through the Pension Credit campaign, run by Dorset Council up until Christmas last year, there has been an increase of 48% in people applying for Pension Credit. Every successful application unlocks the door to other benefits, to which people are entitled, such as the Winter Fuel Payment, Council Tax reduction, Housing Benefit (for renters) or Support for Mortgage Interest (homeowners), the ability to apply for a free TV licence (if you are 75 or over) and help with NHS costs.

Dorset Council Budget 2025/26 – Dorset Council's budget of £417.2 million for 2025/26 was approved at the Full Council meeting on 11th February with substantial investment earmarked for essential frontline council services. Dorset is heavily dependent on council tax for funding of the essential services it provides. Council Tax will increase next year by just under 5% (3% plus 2% for the adult social care precept). The increase is equivalent to £1.91 extra per week for a Band D

property. As you will no doubt heard in the press, the budget included plans to introduce evening and overnight parking charges in Dorset Council run car parks. Following much criticism from councillors and residents across Dorset, the leading party at council have decided to conduct a thorough review of all parking services before making any decisions, taking a closer look at changing trends in car park usage and the impact of parking charges on everyone. This will involve further engagement with residents, business owners and local members. I will keep you informed of the progress on the review and when you can contribute.

In the meantime, if you have a question about the council budget, there is an opportunity during the next Facebook LIVE Q&A on Wednesday, 5th March at 6pm. The panel is made up of Cllr Nick Ireland, leader of Dorset Council, Cllr Simon Clifford, Cabinet member for Finance and Capital Strategy and Aiden Dun, Executive Director for corporate Development. Questions can be submitted in advance by sending them to comms@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk by 5pm, Monday, 3rd March.

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For those residents not on line, who have important questions or concerns, call Dorset Council on 01305 221000, 8am to 8pm, 7 days a week or email: communityresponse@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk. All minutes of meetings can be found on the Dorset Council website: <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk>