

Meeting With Councillor Spencer Flower Wednesday 5th October 2011

Present: Councillor Spencer Flower; John Pendrill ACRA; Jim Biggin ACRA

Of the population that supports and uses Dorset County Council 25.6% are aged 65 or over. The figures for East Dorset and Christchurch are respectively 27.7% and 29.9%. This demographic bias towards the over 65s is creating problems across the County by causing an ever increasing burden on the Adult Social Care budget.

The system for funding Local Government still embraces the concept of Floor and Ceiling. In other words Dorset County Council has to cross-subsidise other Councils to the tune of £7.4 million, even though Dorset County Council remains the second lowest grant funded Council in the Country. The current four block formulae can cause many anomalies so that, for example, Dorset has to pay into a central fund to cross-subsidising other Shire Counties, such as Surrey.

Council Tax has now been frozen for 2012-13. However this is subsidy paid by Central Government for one year only. If nothing is done to change that then in 2013-14 the County will have to make that money up but it will be restricted as to the extent to which it can increase Council Tax. This mechanism is thus a way for continuing to squeeze Council spending whilst creating favourable headlines. The capping level for 2012-13 appears to be 2.5%. Levied as an increase in the DCC Council Tax this would yield £5.0 million per annum.

Dorset remains hopeful that they will receive at least 85 pence in the pound of their Icelandic deposits. They have received over 40% back so far and are expecting a further amount in the foreseeable future, but liquidation of the Icelandic Banks mortgage book will take some time to complete.

The process for cutting back on Council expenses has been refined and now includes a cross examination of budget holders by the Leader of Council, Councillor Flower, the Chief Executive and the Chief Finance Officer. For 2012-13 this has produced recurring savings of £28 million a year. Further additional recurring savings of around £27 million a year are still required over the next three years.

The Dorset Waste Partnership is up and running since April. The target for the percentage of waste going to landfill has been set at near zero. The recycling target is set at 60% rising to 70% over the next few years. Residual waste will be processed to produce energy using external market outlets such as the one at Marchwood, avoiding the need for landfill. This excellent progress reinforces the case that was made by Christchurch Residents Associations against the proposed waste processing plant at Hurn, which had it been built would have been a huge white elephant, exactly as we predicted.

The centralised control centres that were to be foisted upon the Dorset fire service are unusable and represent a huge waste of public money. Our fire service will continue to be run very efficiently by avoiding the use of these centres. Items such as IT equipment installed in these centres will be considered for use elsewhere rather than remaining as useless products, but so far no detailed work had been undertaken to establish the feasibility of this course of action.

There is a drive on to find sources of renewable energy which could include on-shore wind turbines, although this option is likely to be unpopular with the communities affected. The plans to switch off selected streetlights at midnight will produce net revenue savings to the taxpayer over the 25 year period of the PFI funding. As the lights should last significantly longer than that these savings, once achieved, will last well into the future

There are plans to match -fund the provision of superfast broadband service across Rural Dorset, following the announcement that £9.4 million will be made available from central Government. However, this could well be constrained by the current economic climate as Industry and Commerce will be expected to provide the other £9.0million. Whether this project will be a success will depend on a significant financial commitment by all concerned.

The joint working and shared service delivery , undertaken by East Dorset and Christchurch administrations, has been very successful in driving down revenue costs and improving service quality. Such is the recognition of a job well done that Councillor Spencer Flower has been asked to give a keynote speech at a meeting of SW Councillors in November that will address the issue of shared services from an Elected Members perspective.