

Verwood Town Council Meeting – Tuesday 20 December 2011

County Councillor Report – Cllr. Spencer Flower

Budget Preparation –The Budget Working Group has now taken a preliminary look at the County Council's overall and directorate budgets. Further work is now underway as a result of these meetings. The estimated budget gap for 2012/13 is £7.5 million and for 2013/14 £8.5 million. There will now be a second round of meetings, which will give rise to recommendations to the Overview Committees, Cabinet and County Council to shape next year's revenue and capital budgets. These are tough times and we have to make difficult choices whilst at the same time do our utmost to protect front-line services delivery. There are no easy options.

We have achieved or identified £30.5 million of the £31.0 million savings required in 2011/12 which is an unprecedented level of savings in a single year with no outside help.

Council Tax Freeze – The 2010/11 Council Tax Freeze, is supported by a special grant from Government for the settlement period. The Government has recently announced that a further freeze grant for 2012/13 would be on offer to local authorities who held Council Tax at current levels. The Cabinet at its meeting on the 14 December is recommending to Members that the Council Tax be frozen for 2012/13. The grant worth about £5.0 million is based on a 2.5% Council Tax increase. The big worry is that this is “one off money” which will leave the County Council having to find further savings of £5.0 million pa in the future.

Dorset Highways Service. There has now been one full month's operation of the new organisation; and although not everything is perfect the exercise has been very successful when you consider the scale of change. Teams are settling in to their new roles and starting to interact with each other. There have been some communication issues but by and large these are being dealt with as the teams begin to understanding the changed operational conditions.

Members have received organisation charts giving contact details of their local liaison officers and area technical officers; this information has also been disseminated to Parish and Town clerks. There is still some confusion about the new snowplough contracts.

National Planning Reforms –The proposed simplification and devolution of power to local level is welcome. There are concerns about the details of the presumption in favour of sustainable development where a local plan is “out of date or silent”. Concerns too about the need for strategic planning which relies on the “duty to cooperate” between authorities. There has been extensive national debate stimulated by the consultation and there are signs that the government is about to incorporate significant changes into the revised NPPF. This is why the completion of the Local Development Framework [LDF] is so important as it will protect the green belt from inappropriate development.

Volunteers –Some recent figures underline the value of this investment. In North Dorset, a pilot has just started to maintain the Rights of Way using volunteers. It started in September and in that month there were 3 man days of volunteer time, rising to 31 in the month of October and set to rise further. If the success continues it will be rolled out across the county. The Countryside Ranger Service now has a network of friends (Avon Heath, Durlston, and North Dorset Trailway) that numbers in excess of 2,000 with 200-300 active volunteers. Durlston Country Park benefits from the equivalent of some 5 full time posts in voluntary effort throughout the year and there are 30-35 volunteer rangers who have been trained to become self sustaining and can work on their own initiative. In addition a new team of Countryside Access volunteers has recently been inducted