

Date: 24 August 2007

Letter to all Parish Councillors

Dear Councillor

We wrote to you recently with regard to the “Tough Choices – Local Delivery” programme of North Dorset. We have had some queries and this letter is to update you and alert you to where information can be found. We have sent full information, including full descriptions of the services to be considered within Local Delivery and how much they currently cost NDDC to your Parish Clerk. We are aware, however, that it is a challenge to copy all of this information and it may not have been possible for the Parish Clerk to copy them all to you. To assist, we have made sure that the information is on our website (www.north-dorset.gov.uk) and there is a link to **Local Delivery** on the front page.

We understand that for some new Parish Councillors, there is a need to explain what all this is about. “Tough Choices” is a three part programme, of which Local Delivery is one strand. In our recent letter we advised you that, because of the actions of national government, the non-statutory services which NDDC has provided for many years would no longer be funded out of Council Tax. NDDC has one of the lowest Council Tax precepts in England but we have been capped along with the rest. NDDC’s precept has been kept very low for many years under Independent, Liberal Democrat and Conservative administration and is now about half the national average for District Councils. It is now nowhere near enough to keep many of our valued local services going, and the national government won’t allow us to increase the tax by enough to fund those services.

Having identified that non-statutory services can no longer be funded out of Council Tax, we note that other councils have responded by simply shutting services down – no matter how damaging the consequences for local people. We are trying, by involving local people in choosing what services are important to them, to find alternative ways of funding services. This can only be done by involving our local councils – Town and Parish – working together with their local community partnerships. Town and Parish Councils are not subject to the capping regime, under current rules, and last year the majority of parishes voted sufficient funding to maintain the services for one year, to allow time for discussions to take place.

A quick guide to the services under discussion is enclosed.

The Steering Group running the Local Delivery programme is suggesting a straightforward process:

- (1) Identify which of these local services YOU think your public would be entitled to, and which you believe should be locally funded. This is the ‘Decision In Principle’ which we referred to in our earlier letter;
- (2) Assess what you would like to contribute and when (over the next four years) and, where relevant, work out the cost of providing them locally. The Town Councils are leading on this;
- (3) Have discussions about how services could be provided locally and what you would want them to do;
- (4) Plan budgets and precepts accordingly.

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We have been asked what else the Council is doing to reduce costs. Our total net budget is just over £8 million and we provide approximately 50 different services; the largest are refuse and recycling collection, benefits administration, leisure and development control. The other two strands of the Tough Choices programme are making substantial cost reductions in the Council's spending and the Council has already achieved £2.2 million cost reductions in the last three years.

Shortfall in government grants means that for every 1% rise in costs to the District Council, the Council Tax has to be increased by 6% to fund them; even without capping the Council is continually being squeezed. We are lobbying government hard about the situation.

We are writing to you jointly: one of us is a Conservative, and leader of NDDC; the other is a Liberal Democrat, and leader of the opposition. We speak as one on this issue. Please let us know if you would like us to answer questions at your next meeting.

Yours sincerely

Peter Webb
Leader, North Dorset District Council

David Milsted
Leader of the Lib Dem Group, NDDC
Leader, Local Delivery Working Party

c.c. Members of North Dorset District Council
David Webb, DAPTC
Town Clerks

Local Delivery – A Quick Guide to affected services

- Arts – we fund Artsreach by £10,800 a year
- Leisure Centres – we have put capital aside for a new community facility in Gillingham to be run by a Trust and are negotiating alternative arrangements for the other Leisure Centres, if they have local support. That local support would consist of subsidy from Towns and Parishes in the surrounding areas. The usage patterns of the Leisure Centres are available on the website.
- Countryside Service – we spend £80,000 on a partnership with the County Council. The Rangers look after a number of open spaces across the district and manage those areas for us. They also promote the use of the countryside and do educational activities. These sites are also on the website.
- Amenity areas – we spend £37,100 on cutting grass and looking after a range of amenity areas in the district
- Environmental initiatives – we spend £19,100 on promoting and communicating the North Dorset waste and recycling schemes and preparing guidance to support sustainability.
- Outreach: sports and recreation – we spend £26,000 developing and promoting healthy living initiatives and supporting sports events provided by schools, youth and sports clubs, not least for disabled and disadvantaged groups.
- Public conveniences – the District operates public conveniences in the towns – the towns are considering whether it will be a good idea to operate these themselves.
- Citizens Advice Bureau – this provides a vital service to families and individuals with problems including debt advice, housing advice and benefits advice. Currently the District Council funds them by £73,900 a year which is a large grant for a District Council but reflects the importance of the service. Would parishes be willing to contribute?
- Street Cleaning – the towns have indicated that they may be interested in taking over the town orderlies to fulfil multiple tasks in keeping the area clean and neat. The towns are estimating the costs of this new way of working.
- Car Parks, Markets – these are on the list but are income earning for the District Council. The towns may choose to have a greater influence over them and negotiate a financial settlement with the District Council.

Please see our website for a “ready reckoner” of what these costs could mean per Parish Council should it wish to contribute. This is calculated on current cost basis – you may decide to support but at a lower cost.

It would be more equitable if agreement could ultimately be reached on a common approach to funding between contributors.