

NEWS

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LOCAL COMMUNITIES SAY “YES” TO KEEPING LOCAL SERVICES

Local services, such as public leisure centres, public toilets and support for the Citizens' Advice Bureau are under severe threat in North Dorset. Central Government action has prevented the District Council from planning to continue providing these services in the medium term.

Previous plans (first made public over four years ago) to increase North Dorset's very low District rate towards the national average rate over four or five years have been overwritten by Government 'capping' regulations.

Consequently the District Council's tax income is now effectively frozen at a little over half the national average District rate per household. This is too low to sustain discretionary local services at current levels. Unless Government changes its current regulatory or funding approach, within about three years all local discretionary services provided by North Dorset (which currently account for a quarter of the net operating budget) will cease being funded by North Dorset.

Since mid-summer, the District Council has been in discussion with local community leaders from the many local councils within North Dorset about this situation. In recent weeks, town and parish councils have been meeting to consider their responses.

To date, all five Towns and some 30 Parishes have decided, in principle, to support the continuation of these public services for one year, by helping to pay for them. Several more parishes will be meeting in the coming days and weeks to give their verdicts.

North Dorset District Council (NDDC) has been 'pruning' costs and focussing resources for some years. This year a number of tourism projects ceased to be delivered by NDDC: rural tourism promotion is now combined with East Dorset, while local people have set up two separate trust companies to run the Tourist Information Services in Blandford and in Shaftesbury.

- more follows -

Local communities say “yes” to keeping local services: continued ...

This concept of ‘devolution’ towards more local delivery of, and responsibility for, certain public services appears to have support from central Government, as well as local communities. Indeed, as the examples above have shown, in many cases a more local delivery can offer cost advantages overall compared to such services being provided by a District Council, which is liable to higher taxes (such as business rates) than certain trust-based organisations.

The process of ‘devolving’ services is a lengthy one. The current trend of support from Towns and Parishes in keeping existing services is likely to allow sufficient time over the coming financial year to examine in depth alternative, devolved delivery arrangements for those services that local communities wish to retain, and to thus safeguard their future in subsequent years.

The approach by NDDC towards involving local Town and Parish Councils in the future of local discretionary services has benefited from cross-party political support.

Peter Webb, Portfolio Holder for Finance at North Dorset District Council, said: “I was completely taken aback about a year and a half ago when Government changed their own capping rules of the previous year, and forced this Council to re-bill residents, and abandon its medium term financial plans. I did not think they would so lightly remove all rights of local democratic choice over so-called ‘discretionary services’ for the people of North Dorset.

“I am still furious that it concerns them not one jot that as a direct consequence, our residents face a future without public access to leisure centres, Citizens Advice Bureaux, the management of public open spaces and so on. On the other hand, I am delighted that so many Towns and Parishes have recognised, at least in principle, that these services are of long term value to their communities, and have been prepared to take unprecedented action in their defence. They deserve to succeed.”

David Milsted, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, said: “We are playing our full part in finding other ways to fund the services local people have come to rely on, now that the District Council is unable to pay for them. We will continue to work with communities, across party boundaries, to help make this possible for our residents.”

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