



**Dorset
Community
Action**

RURAL TRENDS IN DORSET

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CONTACT DETAILS:

Rachelle Smith

*Dorset Community Action, Community House,
The Barracks, Bridport Road, Dorchester, DT1 1YG
Direct phone: 01305 216411*

Email: rachelle.smith@dorsetcommunityaction.org.uk

Website: www.dorsetcommunityaction.org.uk

Charity Registration Number: 1060910
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INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS

This quarter has seen us become more aware of what the cuts in national and local government spending will mean to us on the ground. Although the full impact has not yet hit us, communities are gearing up, in some cases to campaign vigorously against some of the proposed changes, such as the lively campaigns to save libraries from closure or to keep school crossing patrols, in other cases to prepare to take over activities or to investigate ways of plugging the gaps or mitigating the effects.

Inevitably this makes our report somewhat gloomy again. Nevertheless there are plenty of examples of communities working together for the common good throughout this report so let us bear that in mind and try not to be too downhearted!

1. VILLAGE SHOPS, PUBS AND POST OFFICES

Yet again there are some closures to report. The village shop at West Lulworth, Hambury Stores, has closed although it may re-open for the summer months. In the meantime a shopkeeper from Wool has been enterprisingly providing a mobile service with his van in the British Legion car park next door. On the pub front The Crown and Anchor at Walford, Wimborne has closed and there seems little prospect of the Fleur de Lys at Cranborne re-opening at the moment.

Plans in Shillingstone for the Post Office to re-open as a Post Office Local – and therefore to be open “all hours” came to an unexpected halt barely two days before completion so it looks increasingly unlikely there will be a post office service of any sort in this village. More hopefully, in Hazelbury Bryan, although the village shop on the recreation ground has closed as reported in the last Rural Trends, a Post Office Outreach service is expected to open shortly in the other shop that is now trading in the village once broadband has been installed.

As reported last quarter, the Old Swan at Toller Porcorum was put up for sale at auction by Palmers Brewery on December 16 in Toller Village Hall. As expected there were no bidders for the reserve price of £165000. The chairman of the parish council said they were very disappointed at the outcome of the auction and in particular the high reserve price the brewery had put on the property. The council are now working on preparing a business plan to demonstrate it is a viable community venture.

There are also moves to investigate the viability of buying the Fountain Inn, an old village pub at Enmore Green, on the outskirts of Shaftesbury as a community venture. A local man believes this could have a thriving future as a community-run pub and wants to form a group to buy it from Punch Taverns which has put it up for sale. Doubtless we will be reporting on progress in future Rural Trends reports!

In Trent, the steering group for the proposed community –run shop has put in its application for an extension to the village hall to house the shop. Last month Queen Thorne Parish Council declared its support for the proposal.

There is however, as we reported last quarter, some vociferous opposition to the plan. In Bishops Caundle on the other hand plans are progressing well for a new community- run shop and Post Office and it is anticipated this should open in late May.

Unfortunately it will no longer be possible for community enterprises such as these to seek funding through the Rural Development Programme for England's Community and Social Enterprise Fund as funding for this has been withdrawn as part of governmental cutbacks.

A plan by the Stapleton Arms in Buckhorn Weston to create four new guest rooms by converting existing staff accommodation and then providing staff accommodation by building two cottages in the pub car park was rejected on appeal for road safety reasons. The plan had been unanimously opposed by the parish council and North Dorset District Council had agreed with them.

On a more cheerful note Palmers Brewery is to spend £400000 in a major overhaul of three West Bay pubs, the Bridport Arms Hotel, the George Hotel and the West Bay. The Spyway Inn at Askerswell was crowned West Dorset Pub of the Year by CAMRA (the Campaign for Real Ale) and now goes into the Regional Pub of the Year competition. Robin Hill Stores at Marnhull was chosen as the regional winner in the best village shop or post office section of the Countryside Alliance Awards, (as it was in 2008). Crossways Post Office and village shop is bucking the trend and unveiling plans to expand. It has come to an agreement with Magna Housing who owns the land adjacent to the shop and it has acquired the land to expand the shop floor area.

2. VILLAGE AND COMMUNITY HALLS

This quarter saw Leigh Village Hall receive a five star accreditation for its kitchen and the volunteers who run it. Leigh was also the first village hall in Dorset to gain national Hallmark accreditation for the quality of its hall and its management. It has now been joined by Durweston and it is expected at least two more halls will shortly be joining this list!

Corscombe Village Hall (www.corscombe.org/CHall.asp) meanwhile has gone decidedly green. After a spate of oil thefts it decided to investigate renewable energy possibilities and chose a biomass fuel system with a wood pellet burning boiler. Such a system costs around £33000, way beyond the means of the village hall, but fortunately, the hall made successful applications to the Community Sustainable Energy Programme and the Low Carbon Building Programme. The committee has used local suppliers wherever possible. Since in addition the Ladybirds Playgroup made a successful application to Grassroots Grants for a new garden area and the First Responders donated a new cooker the village hall now has a whole new look to it.

The running of a different kind of community building, in this case a sports hall, has been taken over by a community association in Beaminster. Jurassic Leisure announced in November that it could no longer operate the hall but a new association, the Beaminster Community Sports Association, was quickly formed with the aim of taking over the running of both the swimming pool and

the sports hall. The district council allocated £5000 to the association in February to help cover increased costs as the number of facilities available at the school for community use outside of school hours increases. This is expected to include an astro turf pitch, a fitness suite and even eventually a hydrotherapy pool.

3. SCHOOLS AND CHILDCARE

Again this quarter Dorset schools had excellent results in the school league tables and in Ofsted reports. Sixpenny Handley First School was rated outstanding whereas at its last inspection in 2007 it was only graded satisfactory. The inspection thought the capacity for further improvement was outstanding. Wool C of E VA First School, a school that was originally proposed for closure under the Purbeck Review but which will now stay, was also rated outstanding by Ofsted inspectors as was Cerne Abbas First School.

Many pupils also did well in the SAT tests although equally in many schools teachers boycotted the tests so it is difficult to make comparisons. GCSE results for 2010 showed an improved pass rate (for percentage of pupils getting 5 GCSEs at grade C or above) at many schools with big increases recorded for Sturminster Newton High (from 56% in 2009 to 66% in 2010) and the Royal Manor Arts College on Portland (from 58% in 2009 to 65% in 2010).

In February Sherborne Children's Centre opened at last with a purpose built building in the grounds of the Youth Centre at Tinney's Lane. With an outdoor play area and garden as well as good indoors facilities the centre can offer active play sessions, paediatric first aid, a young parents' group and so on. The central government grant to Sure Start centres has been cut by 12% however. In Dorset the council is hoping to achieve most of the savings on management costs but inevitably some providers will be hit.

There was good news for the North Dorset group of the charity Home Start. Home Start aims to help families with children under five and there is already an established group in West Dorset. Now a group is aiming to start in North Dorset and were very pleased to receive a grant of £5000 from the County Council towards its planned start this autumn. Regrettably the grant comes with a warning that cutbacks mean there can be no grant in the future. The group has already received a £10000 Awards for All grant and has also made its own fundraising efforts and received donations.

Frustration was reported at Puddletown First School over progress in developing new premises. In 2005 its Ofsted report said its premises were no longer fit for education. Initially it was planned to move the school to a site closer to Puddletown Middle School but this proved to be too costly. There have now been delays over the proposed new site and design, hence the frustration.

More positively a new foundation base was opened by the Bishop of Sherborne at Piddle Valley First School. This allows the pre-school and reception class to work together for part of the day. The pre-school, which had

previously run as a separate charity, is now under the governance of the school. Several pre-schools, such as Stower Provost and West End Pre-School in Sherborne, are working hard to upgrade their outdoor play facilities or garden areas too.

On the subject of outdoor areas at Litton Cheney, the children of Thorners School have planted an orchard of Dorset apple trees in their new discovery area. The discovery area is an innovative idea run by families to regenerate around an acre of school land as a place for conservation, relaxation and to explore the natural world. The next phase of the project is to develop the history zone where children can role play being a Roman or a Viking etc. Other plans include a woodcraft camp and forest gardening.

As part of the spending cuts, the County Council has proposed to axe its funding for school crossing patrols at 65 crossing patrol sites over this year thereby making savings of over £200000. It hoped that schools, parish councils or parent volunteers would take over the provision. A campaign was launched almost immediately to protest against this proposal and has been very vocal, with petitions, posters and demonstrations (www.save-lollipop-people.blogspot.com).

4. TRANSPORT

Transport seems to have been relatively unaffected by cuts from the County Council although there will be changes. All the demand responsive transport (DRT) routes run by Nordcat are to be replaced by the more conventional scheduled routes in April and will be run by other commercial bus companies such as First or Wilts and Dorset. Although this has meant no job losses for the drivers as they will be transferred to the companies now operating these routes, it may make life more difficult for Nordcat, which is the largest community transport provider in the county.

Villagers in Portesham were left dismayed when their stone bus shelter, built and maintained by the parish council, was demolished. Originally a planning application for demolition had been put in by the owners of the property outside which it stands, and had received 180 comments. But the application was withdrawn as it appeared that they did not require planning permission to demolish the shelter. Campaigners, on the other hand, argued that legally the public had overriding rights to access and use the shelter.

Unfortunately the county is affected by cuts taking place in Somerset and Devon. For example, Somerset's withdrawal of the 58 service on evenings and Sundays means there will no longer be any Sunday or evening services in Sherborne! Devon has withdrawn their Saturday service 690 between Axminster and Bridport. More positively West Dorset and North Dorset have both agreed to provide extra funding so that concessionary bus pass holders will continue to be able to use their bus passes before 9.30 a.m. West Dorset District Council pledged £42000 and North Dorset District Council £17108 in order that particularly those who live in rural areas would continue to be able to use all the somewhat sparse services available!

5. HOUSING

As we reported last quarter the picture for affordable housing looks much more difficult in the future than it has done. Possibly as a consequence of this there is relatively little to report this quarter on the housing front. The County Council finally agreed to give planning permission for ten years for a travellers' site to consist of eight pitches at a site off the A30 on the outskirts of Shaftesbury, just in time to secure government funding for the project. There is some strong local opposition to the plan of course.

The plans to convert the Weymouth women's refuge into a halfway house seem nearer completion. The aim is to have four or five flats to provide short-term move-on accommodation from other refuges in the area. Also in Weymouth Alabaré Christian Care has now opened its first home to provide care and support for ex-service personnel.

There has been some focus on the homeless this quarter with Shelter Dorset warning that the government's proposed cuts to legal aid will mean that people with difficulties obtaining their benefits, or in debt, or being exploited by unscrupulous landlords or similar difficulties will not be able to access relevant services. It estimates that it will no longer be able to help in around two-thirds of its current cases as a result of these proposals and that it is the poorest and most vulnerable who will suffer.

Perhaps the young people on the West Dorset YouthBank panel share these concerns as they have allocated £350 towards providing emergency packs for homeless young people. The Routes drop-in centre in Dorchester sees around 60 homeless young people every year.

On the Community Land Trust scene Buckland Newton hope to have their new development complete by August (www.lyddenmeadow.co.uk). At Worth Matravers, (www.worthcpt.org) building should finally start this summer and be complete by next March.

6. HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE

As we reported last quarter there have been some very severe cutbacks announced in Dorset County Council provided services in particular. In some cases campaigners have been active in defending these services. For example the Portland Carers Support Group has urged the local community to ensure the Fairfield Day Centre on Portland is not closed. This carers' group would probably fold if the day centre closed as it is only when they get a brief respite from caring duties that they can attend meetings and devote time and energy to running such a group. The day centre has recently had an outdoor area re-vamped into a pleasant sitting out garden courtesy of the efforts of the

Portland Community Partnership. The community is hopeful the centre is sufficiently well used to be safe from closure but is taking no chances.

Voluntary groups that provide support to a variety of individuals with different needs are trying new ways of making up the shortfall from cuts in grants. So for example a support group for families of autistic children, the A Stars, has to make up a shortfall of £2000 and is appealing for donations from local businesses. The Wessex Autistic Society is also appealing for help towards the annual cost of providing drop-in sessions for adults with Asperger's Syndrome. After running a service in Bournemouth for almost ten years, the society has recently started a service in Dorchester and would now like to open a new group in Yeovil.

In fact interest in support groups for particular conditions seems high. An individual with tinnitus for example has put out a call for fellow sufferers who are interested to contact him to form a support group for this as currently the nearest support group is in Bournemouth. A prostate cancer support group set up 12 months ago now has 40 members and meets every two months whilst the first meeting of a Hepatitis C support group was held in Weymouth recently.

Dorchester has signed up to become a "Heart Town" in a joint initiative between the Town Council and the British Heart Foundation. The initiative will include efforts to raise awareness of heart disease and also to fundraise for the Mending Broken Hearts appeal which aims to develop a treatment to repair damaged heart muscle. In another local initiative the organisation Real Baby Milk (www.realbabymilk.org) in partnership with NHS Dorset and Change4Life have produced the Essential Guide to Breastfeeding in Dorset.

There was somewhat worrying news from the Alzheimer's Society which compared previously established rates of prevalence of dementia to government population estimates with the number of people diagnosed with the disease by their GPs. This shows that there are stark variations in the number of people suffering from the disease and those who have actually received a medical diagnosis. Dorset has the lowest rates of diagnosis, at only 26%, whereas at the other end of the spectrum in Belfast, using these calculations, 69% of sufferers receive a diagnosis. It is not clear what causes the discrepancy and it seems at odds with other information about improvements to the dementia services in the county reported on in previous quarters.

The financial troubles of the County Hospital do not appear to be over yet. Although it is on track to reduce its deficit it has carried out more procedures, particularly in orthopaedics, than it was contracted to do and so has not got paid for these. The hospital has saved money by not filling vacancies but needs to save more. Readers will remember that the hospital was plunged into crisis back in 2009 when it emerged there was a projected deficit of £7.4 m.

On a more positive note the Dorset Health Trust has given a donation of £150000 towards the appeal for a new digital mammography machine for the

hospital and patients have finally won a battle over waiting times at the pain clinic. The NHS has agreed to source an additional consultant anaesthetist at the pain clinic to clear the backlog of overdue pain killing injections.

An innovative card scheme has been introduced in Dorset to help people suffering from mental illness and their carers. The aim is for card holders to be able to show a simple message about their condition quickly and clearly so as to reduce stress and anxiety in certain situations. The scheme has been introduced by Rethink, initially in Dorset only but might be rolled out elsewhere if it proves successful. Also the Four Leaf Clover Club in Sherborne reported a positive start to 2011 with a new name – the Sherborne Centre for Well-being and new volunteers and a new vegetarian menu for its Zest café, new reading groups and new peer support groups.

7. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

As ever the big issue in the county is broadband and in particular faster broadband than we have at present, preferably without an additional cost. The Dorset Public Sector Network (DPSN) team which arranges connections for local authorities and other public providers is now looking to choose an internet services provider to serve them all. However it is hoped to extend the network's availability to businesses as well. On this basis the DPSN will shortly be making a bid for funds from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. If the bid is successful, it is intended to use the funds to extend broadband availability to areas where the market would not otherwise do so.

As we have reported before, Community Learning Centres have been finding life a struggle financially and at the end of February Beaminster's Community Learning Centre had to close as it had no more funding. However the Town Council agreed almost immediately it was too important a community facility to lose and took responsibility for the premises. It intends to operate it in a reduced form whilst looking at options for its continuation.

8. COMMUNITY SAFETY

There was some relatively good news on this front when the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service received a better settlement than expected – in fact instead of the 25% cut predicted their government settlement saw an increase of just over 1%. At the moment it appears that the following year will see a small cut of £115000 but there should be an increase again in 2012-2013. However, taking into account inflation and running costs, these amounts still mean a cut of around 6% and the fire authority is investigating the possibilities of sharing top level management with the Devon and Somerset Fire Service to save money.

As a result of the spending cuts on the police force the budget for 2011 – 2012 provides for 1344 police officers, a drop of 103 from the present position and 914 police staff, a drop of 145, making a total job loss of 248. The force will be obliged to save £18m. over the next four years. Figures released in March revealed an 8% increase in complaints against Dorset Police last year,

in line with the picture nationally. Most complaints were about rudeness but there were also more serious allegations including 97 of assault and 105 of neglect of duty.

The proposal to close the coastguard station on Portland continued to cause anger amongst the local community. Apart from the loss of jobs, the main concern is that if the coastguard station goes, then local knowledge and understanding of the area goes too. 150 people turned out to a consultation event organised by the Maritime and Coastal Agency and there is support for the coastguards to stay from local councillors and the local MP. However it looks unlikely that the decision to move to two national centres will be reversed.

9. PLAY AND YOUNG PEOPLE

There is little good news this quarter as the reality of what the funding cuts means for frontline services and jobs begins to hit home. Treads, the youth information advice and guidance centre in Blandford for example, announced in March that it only had funding until November and would have to close then if no additional sources of funding could be found. A bid to Children in Need had been unsuccessful. It is understood that the RendezVous in Sherborne, a similar service, is also finding it hard to make ends meet and this story is likely to be repeated across the county despite the valuable work these organisations do.

At Dorset Youth Association, the umbrella organisation for all the voluntary youth clubs in the county, Dorset V, the local arm of the national youth volunteering charity vinspired came to an end at the end of March as the government announced in January that vinspired would no longer be funded from April 2011. In fact DYA has lost 80% of its taxpayer funded income in total and received £105000 from the Transition Fund, a fund specifically to help voluntary organisations that had suffered very large losses of income from government to help them bridge the gap whilst they find new sources of income. Of course in truth it is most unlikely alternative sources will be found for much of this money and some services will inevitably close. DYA actually only has a third of the income this year that it had last year.

As usual some youth clubs struggled to find enough volunteers to continue going. Charlton Marshall Youth Club for example, which only started up two years ago, and meets fortnightly, announced it would be forced to close unless a new leader could be found. The present leader took over the post temporarily a year ago but has other commitments and has to stop.

Amidst the gloom, there was some good news at Chickerell where work started in March to install the play area and multi-user games area (MUGA). The local community group Chickerell@Play raised £11000 towards the overall cost of £166000 with the lion's share coming from West Dorset District Council (£92000) and the rest from the County Council, the Town Council and the primary school.

A newly established youth forum, Youfirst, is busy raising funds for seating on the field too. Their target is £10000 and they are close to achieving this with grants of £5000 from the Youth Opportunities Fund, £500 from the Turks Head pub, £500 from the Town Council, £2000 from the district council and £500 from the community safety partnership. They have raised £500 from local events such as a community fun day. Once they have achieved their aim of seating they would then like to look at campaigning for a skate park as their nearest park is in Weymouth where you have to pay.

On Portland, Island Play (iPlay), which took over from Play on Portland when funding for that project came to an end, continued to organise some fun and imaginative activities for children. These included “Discovering Wild Weares” when children went out and about building camp fires and discovering the world on their doorstep. The charity is run by enthusiastic local parents.

10. EMPLOYMENT

The latest unemployment figures show that unemployment is still below the national and regional average, although only just so in Weymouth and Portland. In February Tesco opened its new store on Portland with over 800 people applying for the 100 jobs available at the store. 30% of the jobs were filled by individuals already working for Tesco but half of the remaining 70 jobs did go to people in long term unemployment.

Waitrose plans to open a new store in Poundbury with the creation of up to 40 jobs and Lidl's new store in Dorchester should create 30 new jobs. Sainsbury's intend opening a new store in Weymouth, on the current New Look head office site as part of the overall development of the site. Currently the plan is for this site to include a new hotel and restaurant complex creating around 65 new jobs to be built by Whitbread, and a new retail head office for New Look.

It is still hoped that Eneco, the Dutch firm that won the contract for an off-shore wind farm, may choose Portland as an on-shore base where the turbines for the wind farm can be built and that can also act as a supply hub. Should Portland be chosen, this would mean the creation of around 300 jobs but there is stiff competition from other southern ports such as Southampton, Poole and Lymington.

Whether these job prospects will be enough to counterbalance the large-scale job losses coming in the public sector, particularly the 500 job losses at the County Council, is doubtful however. In addition the government has confirmed it intends closing the existing regional Business Link services (www.businesslink.gov.uk/southwest) in November although there will be a full service in Dorset until then to ensure businesses can get support until the new national arrangements come into place.

11. ARTS AND CULTURE

As reported in last quarter's Rural Trends the big story was the proposal to withdraw funding from 20 of the county's 34 libraries. There has been a very spirited campaign against this proposal in all of the communities concerned. In many of them new Friends of the library groups have been formed although of course in others such a group had been in existence for a long time already. A meeting of over 100 people in Sturminster Newton for example aiming to save their library agreed to look at establishing a Friends of Stur Library group.

Many of the groups disagree with the County Council's intention to spend money on building a new library in Dorchester and would prefer to keep the existing premises and spend the money saved on keeping the smaller local libraries. AdLib, an umbrella group campaigning for all the threatened libraries, has proposed the savings could be made by cutting the hours of all the libraries across the county, by reducing headquarters staff and by cutting the book fund. At the moment the County Council is still in the consultation process but has promised to look at AdLib's proposals.

There was better news in Sherborne when ArtsLink (www.sherborneartslink.org.uk) received £365000 from the Big Lottery's Reaching Communities programme. The money will be spent over 5 years and allow ArtsLink to appoint a part-time community arts officer to run a programme of activities for children and young people. The organisations will work with a range of local partner organisations to deliver the TakepART project over the next five years. Activities will include a week-long summer holiday programme of painting and drama for under 10s, a reading group for local young parents and their children, and many others.

There was relatively good news from the Arts Council when it announced its next three year of funding as it had had a 29.6% cut from the government so obviously had much less money to give out than in the past. In fact the cuts were on the whole quite small for many Dorset arts companies and projects – for example, Artsreach which organises touring plays and concerts etc. to village halls in rural Dorset only lost 2.4% of its funding from the Arts Council and Walford Mill in Wimborne also only had a very small cut in funding. Dorchester Arts Centre, recently renamed DorchesterARTS had even better news with an increase in funding of 71.2%. For the past three years most Dorset arts organisations have been working collaboratively together through Dorset Loves Art (DLA) and it appears that this has helped strengthen the number and quality of applications to the Arts Council.