

# Annual Report to Parish Councils 2025-2026

## Councillor Jane Somper – Dorset Council, Beacon Ward

### Introduction

This report provides an overview of the work undertaken over the past year across Beacon Ward. It has been a challenging year for many residents, particularly with regard to flooding, highways disruption, and access to services in our rural communities.

Throughout, my focus has remained on ensuring that the concerns of our parishes are heard and acted upon, and where necessary, pressing Dorset Council officers for responses and progress.

### 15 Years Serving Our Community – A Personal Note

This week month a personal milestone: 15 years since I was first elected to public office. In 2011, I was proud to be elected as a District Councillor for North Dorset District Council. I was re-elected in 2015 and, following the creation of Dorset Council, again in 2019 and most recently in 2024. Each time, I've been humbled by the trust placed in me and remain grateful for the support of our community.

What a journey it has been. I've had the privilege of serving as

- Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee
- Lead Member for both Children's Services and Adults Services
- Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Housing
- And now, I continue to serve as:
  - Opposition Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Housing
  - Member of the Farming Panel
  - Working alongside the Chairman of the People & Health Scrutiny Committee
  - Recently appointed to the Licensing Committee

Along the way, I've attended thousands of parish council meetings and met with hundreds of residents, discussing everything from housing benefits, transport, flooding, highways, rural business challenges, and road safety and even the odd lamp post and bus stop issue (I must chase this last point up). These conversations have shaped my work and reminded me daily why I do this, to help people.

Local government isn't always headline-making, but it is where real, lasting change begins, close to the ground and close to the people. Every meeting, every call, every case I've taken up has mattered. This is a team effort.

Thank you for your continued trust and support. I remain committed to standing up for our community and delivering practical solutions to real challenges.

## Highways & Transport

A significant amount of work this year has centred around the Dinah's Hollow slope stabilisation project and the subsequent changes along the A350, including traffic lights and speed restrictions.

While we were told by Dorset council that these measures have been necessary from a safety and engineering perspective, they have understandably proved unpopular with a growing number of residents along the route. I continue to raise these concerns and push for a balanced approach that considers both safety and the day-to-day impact on those living and travelling through the area.

I have been pleased to support 20mph applications in Stour Provost, Ashmore and Hammoon, demonstrating that this policy can work well when supported locally.

However, I am still awaiting a decision regarding the 20mph scheme in Fontmell Magna, which was expected earlier this year but has been deferred. At present, there is no clear indication from officers as to the likely outcome, and I continue to press for clarity. The Group working alongside the Parish Council has been instrumental in pushing for transparency on any decision made in Fontmell Magan, an important part of the decision making process.

## Flooding & Resilience

Flooding has been one of the most serious issues affecting the ward this year, impacting homes, businesses, and causing damage to sections of the road network.

Under very difficult circumstances, the response from highways teams has been strong, and I would like to acknowledge their efforts during both the immediate response and the ongoing repair work.

Looking ahead, there remains concerning uncertainty around the previously announced £5 million for flood resilience projects. There is currently a lack of clarity on both timing and how this funding will be fairly allocated.

One project in Shroton has been a particular focus. I have been working closely with officers, the parish council, and the local flood warden on a scheme that we believe would significantly reduce flood risk in the village. I continue to press for confirmation that this project will receive funding and move forward.

## Community Transport & Rural Isolation

The lack of meaningful community transport remains a growing concern across our villages. For residents who do not drive, this continues to contribute to isolation and difficulty accessing essential services.

Dorset Council under the current administration has produced a significant number of strategies and aspirational statements this year, but these have yet to translate into

meaningful change on the ground. For residents, the day-to-day reality remains largely unchanged, and the lack of tangible progress is both noticeable and increasingly frustrating.

I will continue to advocate for a properly funded and functional community transport network that meets the needs of rural areas.

### **Dorset Council Engagement & North Dorset Representation**

A recurring concern I have raised throughout the year is the lack of focus on North Dorset within Dorset Council decision-making.

Too often, it feels that our area is overlooked or considered as an afterthought when policies are developed or resources are allocated. This is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore and is a growing concern for many members representing this part of the county.

I have consistently made this point, alongside fellow North Dorset councillors, to ensure that our communities are properly considered and not disadvantaged by a lack of visibility at county level.

In addition, I have had to intervene on several occasions to assist residents in obtaining responses from Dorset Council to what should be straightforward enquiries. Despite ongoing restructuring within customer services, improvements in response times are not yet being consistently experienced.

There are, however, positive exceptions, particularly within Highways, where officers continue to respond effectively when required.

### **Financial Pressures & Council Tax**

Dorset Council continues to face significant financial pressures, particularly in relation to adult and children's care services, which together account for over half of the council's total budget.

However, concern is growing that these financial pressures are not being brought under sufficient control, with continued overspend creating an increasingly difficult position.

This sits alongside the recent decision to raise council tax to the maximum level, at a time when many residents are not seeing corresponding improvements in day-to-day services. Dorset now has the highest council tax level in the country, which both I and residents are finding difficult to justify.

For clarity, I did not support this increase at the Full Council budget meeting, as I believe greater assurance is needed that costs are being effectively managed and that residents are seeing value from the contributions they make.

## Looking Ahead

Key priorities for the coming year include

- Securing progress and funding for flood resilience projects
- Continued monitoring and review of A350 traffic measures
- Clarity on outstanding 20mph decisions
- Progress towards a viable rural community transport network
- Ensuring North Dorset receives fair consideration in decision-making and resource allocation
- Improving communication and responsiveness from Dorset Council

## Working with Parish Councils

I remain grateful for the continued engagement, support, and persistence of parish councillors and clerks across Beacon Ward. Your local knowledge is essential in ensuring issues are identified early and properly followed through.