



## RURAL TRENDS IN DORSET

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## INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS



This is the third year that Dorset Community Action (DCA) has produced a report on trends in rural life as far as we can judge them. For several years previously we provided information to go into first a national, and later a regional report written by the Countryside Agency. Dorset's Rural Community Council has been in business for forty years, and for nine years we have contributed in some form to a Rural Trends report. In this year's report we have been a little retrospective and examined in what way life in Dorset has changed over the lifetime of these reports.

Interestingly certain issues were not even included in the early years, presumably since they were not considered important enough for inclusion. For example, last year was the first year a chapter on employment was included, yet we know that patterns of employment can have a profound effect on ways of life in the countryside, whether it be that the advent of broadband makes it possible for more people to work from home, whilst others commute ever longer distances from the villages to the conurbation or even further afield, or that migrant workers from Eastern Europe now do the seasonal work once done by local youngsters or by Gypsies and Travellers.

Observant readers will notice other themes emerging too. For example, food and in particular local produce is of much greater importance than it was. Greater awareness of the importance of healthy eating and the need for the rural economy, especially agriculture, to diversify if it is to survive combine here. Farm shops open in ever increasing numbers and village shops and pubs promote local – and sometimes organic – products in order to appeal to a different market than that of the supermarkets and chain restaurants. National concern as to what we feed our children has translated into local initiatives around supplying good home-cooked and where possible locally grown food for school dinners.

Climate change is also beginning to feature in our planning and interests in a way that was much less evident when the first reports were introduced. This can be seen most obviously in the interest in sustainability and energy efficiency in new village hall and community building projects but also in interest in concepts such as 'food miles' and reducing dependence on the car.

As always, we are grateful to our providers of information. We regularly trawl through our local daily and weekly press, including not only the obvious such as the Western Gazette and the Dorset Echo, but also a plethora of community newsletters and parish magazines. We also talk to a range of service providers and representatives from both the statutory and the voluntary sector and study their many reports and publications in order to understand the national and local context in which they work. Finally of course we are lucky enough to have a large number of workers out on the ground who can be relied upon to provide information and check details for us.

Key findings include:

- Much anxiety over which Post Offices in rural Dorset will be closed following the government's review of the network
- Continued strong support for Village Halls
- Continued development of Extended Schools programme and Children's Centres even in rural parts of the county
- Bus usage has increased, mainly as a result of free passes for the over 60's but fewer and fewer services can be run as commercially viable putting ever increasing pressure on the County Council to run subsidised services.
- Affordable housing continues to be the top priority issue. Despite many examples of concerted local effort to find innovative solutions, the outlook remains gloomy.
- Funding cuts in social care provision generally mean greater pressure on the voluntary sector to fill the gaps
- Although some earlier projects to enable people to make use of new information technology appear to have fulfilled their purpose and be no longer needed, new uses are being developed.
- Crime remains low but anti-social behaviour and road safety remain key concerns.
- There are interesting attempts to involve young people more as active citizens. The importance of play in children's lives is receiving greater recognition.
- Employment levels remain high despite some large-scale closures. Migrant workers are being used to fill labour shortages
- The threat to close thirteen of Dorset's smallest libraries appears to have been averted, at least temporarily, following a sustained campaign. Many heritage and arts projects were started this year, most involving the active involvement of the local community.
- There were some indications of increased interest in green issues and climate change.

## **1. RETAIL OUTLETS (including Post Offices, Village Shops, Pubs and Rural Filling Stations).**

'There is a question mark over the rural network of Post Offices', 'there is much uncertainty amongst postmasters'..... These words are taken not from any current report but Dorset's submission to the Rural Trends report 1999 - 2000. They could apply equally well to the situation this year where the government's announcement of a review of the Post Office network with a firm decision to cut the network by 2500 post offices, both rural and urban, naturally leads to insecurity amongst postmasters and postmistresses. There are 122 post offices in the rural network in Dorset, but uncertainly as to which of these might be closed means that decisions about refurbishment and investment go on hold and some postmasters and postmistresses decide to attempt to sell up. Already the owners of Owermoigne post office and village shop have decided to put their business up for sale, citing uncertainty as to the future of the Post Office network as one of the reasons.



During the year Cerne Abbas suffered a temporary closure of six weeks when the postmaster retired in early May after over thirty years. Fortunately the owner of the Village Stores agreed to create a new post office in his shop. Things looked promising in Hazelbury Bryan when a mobile service started every Monday morning as a satellite service from Ansty in the village shop, which had relocated to a small log cabin on the edge of the playing field.

Unfortunately barely had the service opened when it closed again as a result of the conflict of interests between the two shops (the postmaster running the satellite service also running a village shop in Ansty). Happily the situation was finally resolved.

Work on the community shop in Witchampton suffered some very disappointing knock backs, despite being strongly supported by the Village Retail Services Association (VIRSA). <http://www.virsa.org/pdf/Witchampton.pdf>

It was unsuccessful in its bid to the Big Lottery Community Buildings programme and in addition the Post Office announced that it saw no prospect of re-opening a Post Office service should the community shop come to fruition. This seems to be a complete change of position since there could have been a satellite office set up after the closure of the village shop / Post Office but there was not because of the community shop project. Until now the Post office has appeared to be fully behind the community shop project, indeed being both very positive and very patient. Perhaps the general uncertainty over the future of the network has engendered a change of mind.

Continued strong interest in food and local produce meant that farmers' markets and farm shops continued to do well. A new farm shop opened at Orchard Park Garden Centre on the outskirts of Gillingham in September. The Lagan Farm shop sells meat from cattle reared on the owners' own adjoining farm as well as produce from other local suppliers, including beer from a new brewery, Keystone, just over the border in Tisbury. The Dorset Magazine ran a competition for the first time in 2006 of 'Farmers Market of the Year' and this was won by Bridport.

The shopkeepers of Sixpenny Handley have developed a loyalty card scheme involving all the shops in the village, showing that village retailers can think of lively ideas to assist themselves!

The fortune of rural pubs was more mixed throughout the year. The development of a community pub in Shipton Gorge was very positive when they signed a six-year lease with Palmers brewery in June and re-opened August Bank Holiday weekend. The renovation work cost around £40,000, of which £12,000 was received from DEFRA but much of the rest was done by local fundraising and volunteers also helped cleaning, gardening, curtain-making and much else besides. The whole enterprise seems to have galvanised the village and engendered a great deal of community action.

Elsewhere the Sailor's Return at East Chaldon was ravaged by fire in July but re-opened at the end of October. A very strange situation arose at The Anchor in Shapwick when local residents purchased the freehold of the premises, apparently because they were unhappy at how it was being run. The landlord then banned the owners from using the pub! This situation appears to have ended with a new licensee.

The trend noted in previous reports for pubs to close and for breweries to then apply for permission to convert the property into housing and / or offices continued. In August planning approval was finally given for the former White Hart in Beaminster to be converted into cottages and flats. The pub had been vacant since 2004 and although the original application had been turned down it was allowed on appeal.

The theme of food featured strongly in successful pubs as well as shops. The Crown Inn at Fontmell Magna won a silver award in the 2006 Taste of the West Awards, as did the Shave Cross Inn near Bridport, whilst the Langton Arms at Tarrant Monkton received a gold award for the second year running. Meanwhile on a different theme the True Lovers Knot at Tarrant Keyneston was one of four pubs shortlisted for the national Rural Pub in the Community Award run in conjunction with the Calor Village of the Year Awards.

Hall and Woodhouse meanwhile announced plans to sell off two of their pubs, the Drax in Spetisbury and the Antelope in Hazelbury Bryan. However the good news appears to be that the intention is to sell them as going concerns ie for them to remain as pubs. In an interesting example of entrepreneurship the Drovers Inn at Gussage All Saints launched a village shop service in early May, another example of the way in which rural businesses are responding to change and adapting and developing.

## 2. VILLAGE HALLS AND COMMUNITY BUILDINGS

As previous reports have noted village halls are really the life-blood of rural communities and often the only community facility left after the closure of the village shop, pub, school and bus service! In the 1998 –1999 report was written: 'There continues to be significant activity among village halls, with 20% undertaking major works and around 70% doing some work... This high level of activity has raised the profile of village halls throughout rural Dorset and made people and agencies more aware of this valuable community asset'.

Almost identical words could probably be written today. Certainly the level of interest in village halls remains high. In November the County Council announced its intention to cut its capital budget for village halls substantially in its attempt to balance the books but was persuaded by an active campaign of village hall activists to make only a relatively minor cut of £8,000. They were persuaded in part by the idea that match-funding would be vital if any Dorset village halls were to be successful in the current round of bidding for Big Lottery Funding for the Community Building programme.



As always capital funding remains a problem as the aforementioned programme – which only runs for three years - can only produce around two hundred successful projects throughout the country including both urban and rural areas. Dorset remains in the forefront of the campaign for sustainable long-term capital funding.

Issues other than raising the money for rebuilding or refurbishing halls also affect village halls however. The running of a village hall is becoming ever more complex as a result of changes in legislation, such as the Licensing Act, new Fire and Safety regulations, the Disability Discrimination Act and more besides.

However, this has had one positive side effect, in that village hall committee members have become more aware of their responsibilities as trustees. It is also true that most village halls are now operating in a much more business like manner, drawing up business plans and maintenance schedules and developing a variety of policies on issues such as Child Protection, Equal Opportunities, Health and Safety etc.

An extensive refurbishment of Charminster village hall was completed and officially re-opened in November with new toilets, a kitchen, storage rooms and a revamped committee room. The building was originally constructed in 1877 as a workingman's institute and then extended in 1905. Some of the money for the work came from the Heritage Lottery Fund but there were other smaller grants and also a great many contributions, both cash and in kind from individuals and organisations in the village.

Bridport Town Council took on the lease of the Salt House at West Bay to create a community centre there from a three hundred year old maritime building originally used to store salt for fishermen to preserve their catch on their voyages. West Bay had no public community facility so the renovated building, made disabled-friendly, provides a much needed local facility.

The Exchange at Sturminster Newton, a very large project reported on in last year's Rural Trends, continued successfully throughout the year and will be opened to the public very shortly. Indeed two open days are planned over the weekend of 30<sup>th</sup> June and 1<sup>st</sup> July. Its steering group was selected as regional winners in the Nationwide Awards for Voluntary Endeavour in July 2006. In a good example of use of renewable energy 75% or more of the heating for the hall will be by means of a ground water and air heat exchange system.

Meanwhile in Purbeck a new village hall was built in Studland (<http://www.studlandvillagehall.co.uk/>) to replace the original, built in the 1920's and coming to the end of its useful life. The main Hall is some 50% larger than the old, and the building also contains a meeting room, office, kitchen, and the Social Club. Work on the new hall started in January 2006 and was finished in October. The rebuilding project cost around £600,000 of which a third was raised locally through various fundraising activities and donations by residents and local organisations over the past decade. The balance was made up by grants including substantial grants from Dorset County Council, Purbeck District Council and the Big Lottery fund.

In contrast to Studland (pop 540) a very large community centre, The Hub, opened in Verwood (pop 13590). This has a theatre and a bistro as well as a range of meeting rooms and is managed by a freestanding charitable organisation known as the Verwood Hub Community Association. The name was chosen as the result of a competition amongst local residents and it is the intention the venue should act as the hub of the community!

These are but a few examples of schemes for improvements, renovation and re-build going on throughout the county. It remains the case that village halls continue to be seen as the focus of rural communities and act as stimulators of local community activity and generate much community involvement. As reported last year the trend for village halls, despite the financial restrictions, continues to look promising.

### 3. SCHOOLS AND CHILDCARE

Dorset schools continue to perform well above average on national indicators and many Dorset schools, including very small rural ones, get glowing OFSTED reports. So for instance this year schools such as Bovington First and St Johns C of E in Wimborne were rated as outstanding by OFSTED. GCSE pass rates (for five GCSE's at C or above) stood at 61.6% last year as against a national average of 58.1%. In 1998 the Dorset pass rate stood at 50%.

Historically Dorset has always been relatively poorly funded for its educational provision. Things have moved on considerably recently however and there has been much capital expenditure leading to the re-building or extending of many schools.

Thus this year saw the opening of the re-built Wyvern School in Weymouth. This is a special school catering for children with severe learning difficulties and it has been re-located next to Wey Valley School and St Nicholas and St Laurence Primary School. All three schools are committed to inclusion and there are many plans for joint working. Not only will the ICT and sports facilities of Wey Valley School be available for Wyvern pupils but equally the hydrotherapy pool, soft playroom and other facilities at Wyvern can be made available to the other schools. Some progress was also made towards the rebuilding of Mountjoy School in Bridport, another special school for children with severe learning difficulties, the project having been frustrated by a number of factors to do with planning and the site.

Plans were submitted for a new primary school to be built in the grounds of the old middle school at St Leonard's. The new building will house Archbishop Wake Primary and forms part of the re-organisation in the Blandford area. The site will also house the Blandford Children's Centre and an adult education centre. Other children's centres continued to be rolled out across the county including ones at Broadmayne, West Moors and Ferndown as well as the one at Blandford. The Commission for Rural Communities has recently questioned whether Children's Centres are the best way to meet the needs of rural families and suggested they should develop programmes particular to their circumstances, not mirror service delivery configurations designed for urban areas.  
<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/developing%20childrens%20centre%20in%20rural%20areas.pdf> It will be interesting to see in future reports whether Dorset's Children Centres have found different ways of responding to the challenges of meeting the needs of families in rural areas.



A new pre-school was opened at Charminster in the grounds of the local primary school paid for through a variety of grants, donations from local companies and much active fundraising. The building is in fact a log cabin and is designed to be eco-friendly. A new childcare facility was opened at Gaunts Common, a very rural part of East Dorset, providing pre-school and out of school care for local people. The project received considerable financial support from

East Dorset District Council, SureStart, the Talbot Village Trust and the National Lottery.

Meanwhile in North Dorset, Child Okeford Centre for Care and Learning, built as an extension to the village school, opened its doors. The new £300,000 facility houses the pre-school expanded to provide all round childcare from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm and in the evenings will also be used to provide adult and family education. Residents raised around £10,000 themselves with the remainder coming from grants from the Salisbury Diocese, Liveability Fund, Dorset Rural Renaissance and DEFRA European Fund.

As mentioned in last year's report the Extended Schools agenda requires all schools in rural local authority areas to be providing access to the 'core offer' of wraparound childcare from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm all year round, a varied menu of activities, parenting support, swift and easy referral to specialist services and community access to a school's facilities by 2010. Forty-six Dorset schools were deemed to have achieved full Extended Schools status this year, including Sandford First, Frome Valley First (in Crossways), Symondsbury Primary and St Mary's Catholic in Marnhull. It remains to be seen however whether realistically all rural schools can achieve access to all aspects of the core offer by 2010.

Interest in health and healthy eating in particular led to over sixty Dorset schools achieving Healthy School status. This requires schools to promote a variety of healthy attitudes including healthy eating, physical activity, emotional health and well being and so on. Bere Regis introduced daily power-walks at break time as part of their Healthy Schools strategy, a daily two-lap walk of the school field after morning break-time to help increase fitness and tackle obesity! On the subject of healthy eating, as reported in last year's Rural Trends, Dorset is struggling to re-introduce hot school meals into all its schools as required by government since only two of its primary schools still have functioning kitchens.

A very interesting and innovative approach is being piloted in Bridport using a new central kitchen based at West Dorset Food and Land Trust's subsidiary Local Food Links and based at the Centre for Local Food on St Michael's Trading Estate. This community enterprise already provided the two local primaries with a locally sourced lunch of soup and a roll followed by fruit and a pudding once a week and now that it has its new kitchen provides them, and six other local primary schools with hot lunches five days a week. The scheme uses locally sourced and fair-trade products as far as possible, often organic and has seen uptake grow since its inception.

Elsewhere a new kitchen has been built at Milton-on-Stour Primary following a successful start when the local pre-school began to provide hot lunches on a daily basis in the winter of 2006. This was a temporary arrangement and now the kitchen has been built the school intends providing hot meals for two other local primary schools in the autumn. In Swanage, St Mary's First School came to an arrangement with a local restaurant, Moonlight Bistro, for them to provide hot lunches using seasonal and local produce. The meals are cooked in the restaurant in the morning and then delivered to the school.

Falling school numbers continues to be an issue that raises anxiety and affects both small rural primaries as well as larger secondary schools. As the population gets older and particularly as young people in their 20's and 30's are forced to move away because of high house prices the population gets progressively older and so there are fewer and fewer families with children of school age. Numerous schools

have requested cuts in their admission numbers for 2007-2008 including Swanage First and the Royal Manor School on Portland. There are still several extremely small rural schools in Dorset with numbers below fifty in some cases and naturally this adds to anxiety as to whether such schools will continue to be viable.

Under the new Charities Act independent schools are required to show they are meeting a public benefit test and this has been widely interpreted as meaning that independent schools will need to show they are working more closely with state schools eg by sharing facilities. It is too early to say yet what this will mean in practice as the Charity Commission will not publish its guidance until October but in certain parts of the county (Sherborne and parts of North Dorset for example) it will be worth seeing if there are any practical results over the next few years.

On the whole, despite difficulties with Dorset's funding allocation and falling numbers, the picture for education in the county remains positive. The physical state of the buildings, the pupil / teacher ratio and the amount of support staff available are all now much improved compared to the situation when the first Rural Trends report was prepared. There is a presumption against closure of village schools and the availability of childcare and pre-school education, even in the most rural parts of the county, has improved vastly over this period of time.

#### 4. RURAL TRANSPORT



Provision of public transport in Dorset faces a number of serious challenges. The de-regulation of the public transport network following the 1985 Public Transport Act put significant pressure on non-profit making rural services – which in Dorset's case, means nearly all of them! Car ownership levels in the county are very high in rural areas (for obvious reasons) but particularly with the closure of local services such as village shops and post offices, access to services for those without their own transport in rural areas is a very real issue.

Ten years ago the general feel was that rural transport was in for better times. The government had introduced a Rural Bus Challenge grant for which shire counties could bid and prospects were improving. Today however the situation is a little more mixed. The introduction of free bus passes for the over 60's combined perhaps with greater public understanding of green issues, and climate change in particular, has led to an increase in bus passenger numbers. Indeed so great was the take-up of free passes that this resulted in an overspend in many District Councils, of £62,000 at East Dorset for example and of £250,000 in Christchurch.

In other ways an earlier heavy reliance on the free market saw some chickens come home to roost. There are now so few commercial operators in the county that they can virtually demand their price for running routes that are deemed not commercially viable. Similarly, having in the past almost entirely scrapped the County Council's own school bus fleet, new school buses are now being re-introduced as private operators are either not prepared to bid to run these services or charge extremely high figures for doing so. Thus in June two new yellow school buses were added to the fleet, one to serve Evershot, Mosterton and Beaminster and the other to serve

Ferndown, bringing the school bus fleet up to eight. It is anticipated that the two new buses will result in a saving of £400,000 over the next ten years.

Rural transport continues to be a high priority for Dorset residents: when the County Council conducted a public consultation on budget priorities in the autumn participants were adamant services should not be reduced for rural public transport – in fact they wanted to see more money put into transport projects.

In response the County Council has been developing further its more flexible 'Door to Dorset' demand-responsive transport. The first services introduced were outlined in last year's report but this year the service was extended to many other areas of the county including bus services in the rural communities of the Vale of Allen (between Cranborne and Wimborne) in July 2006 and then between Dorchester, Yeovil and Sherborne in April 2007.

In both these cases the contracts were awarded to Nordcat, the largest community transport enterprise in the county. Nordcat now has fifteen buses, operates a wide variety of dial-a-ride schemes in the north of the county and also hosts the county's scooter schemes.

A few smaller scale schemes saw success this year. The Christchurch Community Partnership's Dial A Bus scheme (<http://www.dorsetforyou.com/index.jsp?articleid=369366>) whose launch was mentioned in last year's report was extended in June to cover Sainsbury's and Stewarts Garden Lands thus giving people the opportunity to shop in a greater range of shops than previously when it only ran to the town centre. The Chideock Bopper Bus managed to overcome its funding difficulties to continue to take children and young people to the Bridport Leisure Centre from outlying villages on a regular basis. However a similar scheme operating in the rural hinterland of Sturminster Newton and Blandford to take youngsters to Tower Park or into Blandford on a Wednesday evening had very little take-up despite extensive publicity.

The much-delayed Dorchester Park and Ride scheme finally started in April. Participants park at the Dorchester Football Club and pay a £1 a day to get a bus into the town centre. Originally the scheme was intended to be used by employees at the County Council, West Dorset District Council and the County Hospital. However the hospital pulled out of the scheme and the County Council had not allowed sufficient time for consultation with its staff so the project could not start until April, leaving the two buses purchased for the scheme sitting idle for several months. Intended to relieve parking and congestion in the town centre, it is obviously too early to say yet whether it is succeeding.

## **5. AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

Affordable housing continues to be one of the burning issues of the moment and is more of an issue today than it was ten years ago. This is because house prices have risen so astoundingly in relation to earnings (house prices rose a staggering 97% in Dorset over the period 1999 – 2005) that fewer and fewer local people are able to purchase their own home. In fact the ratio of house prices to household income is now higher in Dorset than anywhere else in the country apart from London. A study produced in August 2006 by the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Housing 'The South West's Housing Timebomb' shows wages in Dorset would have to triple for locals to be able to afford the average home and warns that

the situation is likely to get worse over the next five years. The number of households on waiting lists for affordable homes has shot up by almost half over the past five years. The spokesman for the National Housing Federation said that the figures 'present a powerful picture of the continuing housing crisis in Dorset'.



So the scale of the problem is huge. The Housing Corporation, the main avenue of housing grant for the building of affordable homes, did announce extra investment for more affordable homes in Dorset as a result of the government's increased national affordable housing programme. West Dorset District Council did particularly well as it was able to add more than £1.9m of its own funding to the Housing Corporation's grant making a total of £7.7m to build a total of 182 homes, 139 for rent and 43 for shared ownership. Of these 87 will be one-bedroomed and 80 two bedroomed.

Similarly the grants will enable Christchurch to build 102 new affordable homes over the two years using £5.6m of Housing Corporation money and £600,000 of their own. The bulk of the money will be spent on the redevelopment of the hospital site in Jumpers Rd with forty-three homes specifically for frail elderly people, twelve key workers flats and six shared ownership houses. However this still leaves a grave shortage of family accommodation in Christchurch.

All the councils and other agencies in the county seek small ways to alleviate the situation, such as West Dorset's HomeBuy scheme that aims to assist people in social rented housing on to the property ladder thereby freeing up their home for another family on the waiting list. Anchor Staying Put, a charity that works to enable older people and people with disabilities to live independently in their own homes has now set up a countywide Housing Options Service after its successful pilot in Weymouth and Portland. Housing Options Caseworkers working throughout Dorset in both rural and urban areas go out to older people to help them make informed decisions as to whether to move, where to move to and so on and are able to give them lots of practical advice down to even helping with the packing up and removal!

As reported in last year's Rural Trends in two rural communities in Dorset local people have decided to take matters into their own hands and are progressing with building homes through a Community Land Trust. Although progress is slow in both cases, in part because this is a new idea that planners and legal departments at the District Councils have to get their heads around, there is little doubt that the end result will be affordable homes in the two villages, Buckland Newton and Worth Matravers, safeguarded to be for local people.

[http://www.communitylandtrust.org.uk/documents/practitioners\\_guide/exhibit\\_17\\_rural\\_housing\\_study.pdf](http://www.communitylandtrust.org.uk/documents/practitioners_guide/exhibit_17_rural_housing_study.pdf)

In another example of local people taking more control of the situation a site for affordable housing is being developed in Maiden Newton. Here Signpost Housing identified an initial site but the parish council suggested an alternative, as the first was prone to flooding. The parish council then commissioned a housing needs survey from the Rural Housing Enabler that identified twenty-two households in the village as being in housing need. Signpost Housing then submitted a planning application for twelve homes and this was agreed. The homes will be built on what is known as a 'rural exception site' and this means, amongst other things that only affordable housing is allowed on the site and tenants will not have the right to buy.

In other rural areas, where parish councils and the local community are very worried about the future sustainability of their village unless there is more low cost housing available for their young people, there are signs of active involvement in the issue. Typically the issue emerges as a high priority in the Parish Plan, often this is followed up by a housing needs survey and then the local community seeks to identify land that could be used as a rural exception site and the involvement of a housing association in building in the area. This is broadly the pattern that took place in Maiden Newton and also in other areas such as Whitchurch Canonicorum where Hastoe Housing is hoping to build in the near future.

Voluntary organisations are also active in providing support to the most desperate in terms of housing need. For example the Pilsdon Community obtained funding from various charitable trusts (Garfield Weston, Alice Cooper Dean) towards a building project to expand their accommodation for people in crisis. The Hub, a project to assist rough sleepers in Dorchester, reported on in last year's Rural Trends, continued its work despite some problems with anti-social behaviour affecting its neighbours that it has worked actively to resolve.

Nevertheless, despite these examples of excellent local effort and grass roots involvement in the issue, the outlook for housing remains gloomy and it seems unlikely to shift from its position as top priority and anxiety in rural Dorset for a long time to come.

## 6. HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE

By contrast with the housing situation, the picture for health in Dorset remains generally fair with dentistry as in previous years flagged up as the one black spot. This year has seen the re-organisation of the five Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) that previously covered Dorset into two, one covering Bournemouth and Poole and the other covering Dorset. The new Dorset PCT now has the same boundaries as the County Council and it is to be hoped that this will make for simpler and speedier administration and joint working between for example health visitors and social workers will be easier as a result. Also as a result of this re-organisation, as of October 2006 there is only one Ambulance Trust, creating one service covering Dorset, Somerset, Devon and Cornwall and the three strategic health authorities for the south west have all been merged to form the new South West Strategic Health Authority. Only time will tell whether these changes make any difference to the services provided on the ground, although part of the programme of change is intended to give local GPs and their teams more responsibility for commissioning services for their patients and thus more freedom to tailor services to the needs of the local community.



Patients gave broadly positive impressions of the services provided by doctors when their views were canvassed by the Healthcare Commission. For example in the South West PCT 89% of patients thought they had been seen as soon as necessary by their GPs. And in October the Healthcare Commission rated mental health care in Dorset as among the best in the country. The County Council, Dorset Healthcare NHS Trust and the former North Dorset PCT, which are jointly responsible for the

provision of adult community mental health services, scored 'excellent', placing them amongst only 9% of providers in the country to get this assessment.

Many ambitious new plans to rebuild or refurbish GP surgeries were announced this year. There was a major refurbishment of the Health Centre at Easton (Portland) in October and in May the Prince of Wales opened the new medical centre at Poundbury that now houses two existing medical practices in Dorchester, the Prince of Wales surgery and the Cornwall Road practice. The centre has a separate but integral pharmacy and a variety of other services. There are also plans to rebuild Puddletown surgery, to develop a new medical centre in the centre of Dorchester to replace the existing Trinity Street service and the new Bridport medical centre finally opened its doors. However there is still some disquiet about the provision of out-of-hours health care in parts of rural Dorset, not only as far as GPs are concerned, but also out-of-hours pharmacy services.

There was some good news for Dorset residents as far as dentists are concerned. A new dental practice taking NHS patients opened in Wimborne. However the proposal for a dental practice at the Yeatman Hospital in Sherborne, on land occupied by a dilapidated bungalow due for demolition has still not happened. In an imaginative move collaboration between Age Concern and a North Dorset dentist means that block bookings are made and older people brought by minibus for check-ups to the practice.

Voluntary effort continued to play an important role in health care. There are numerous 'Friends of...' schemes in Dorset such as the Friends of Blandford Hospital and Friend of the Yeatman in Sherborne. These raise substantial funds towards many services whilst Friends of the practice schemes, of which there are also several in Dorset, continue to offer befriending services and transport to the surgery for those who find it hard to get there on their own.

In Shaftesbury and Gillingham St John Ambulance took on a new role as Neighbourhood First Responders in which St John's volunteers provide immediate care to patients in the minutes before an ambulance arrives. Similar schemes operate elsewhere in the more rural parts of Dorset (Broadwindsor, Lulworth) and are clearly seen as valuable by the Dorset ambulance service. In a similar vein twelve volunteers have been recruited on Portland to respond to emergency calls during the night. During the day Portlanders are covered by emergency care practitioners based at Portland Hospital but at night residents must wait for the ambulance. The twelve volunteers all work in medically related occupations such as paramedics or ambulance care assistants.

News was not so good on the community care front however, when the County Council felt obliged to reduce its social care provision in order to balance its books. The threshold for care provision was changed from a moderate need to a substantial need: this means that only people who need help with most personal care tasks, have an urgent need that will get worse without help or are in danger of abuse or neglect now qualify for help. The cabinet member for adult services explained that in order to keep the criteria to moderate would mean finding an extra £5m and that the County Council just did not have this. There are of course more and more older people in the county, partly as a result of us all living longer and the popularity of parts of the county as a retirement destination and this puts increasing pressure on these services.

This does not mean of course there were no developments in care over the year. For example a Centre for Independent Living opened in Dorchester to offer free advice to anyone who needs help maintaining independence at home. The idea is that people can try out a range of equipment – wheelchairs, mobility scooters, bath lifts and so on – in order to make sure they get exactly what they need. Visitors to the centre can also find out about telecare and telemedicine, new developments that build on already well-established systems such as pendant alarms (Careline etc).

Nevertheless the funding cuts generally mean greater pressure on the voluntary sector to fill the gaps. It is too early to say whether organisations such as Age Concern have seen a big increase in demand yet but it is likely this will feed through gradually over the coming months. Age Concern Dorchester <http://www.acdorchester.org/> ran a very successful campaign to help local older people claim the benefits to which they are entitled resulting in £300,000 being successfully claimed. In Bridport fears that Age Concern's day centre, Chancery House, would be forced to close, have been allayed. Magna Housing Association's Western Area Panel donated a very welcome £5,000 towards its running costs, partly in recognition of the fact many of the older Magna tenants make good use of its services.

Dorset Advocacy was chosen to provide the new Independent Mental Capacity Advocacy service for the county. The service is part of the new Mental Capacity Act, aimed at making sure people who have lost the ability to make their own decisions through dementia or brain injury for example, have their interests safeguarded. The advocate's role is to gain information about a person's wishes, lifestyle choices and religious beliefs. Wherever possible, the person's views should be included in the decision making process. Once the advocate has obtained the information they report to the decision maker. This may include decisions by Social Care and Health on appropriate places for the individual to live or by the NHS on treatment and so on. Once the decision has been made the advocate withdraws from the case.

The above illustrates a trend noted in last year's report: nowadays there is more interest in providing a voice for certain groups to articulate their needs and priorities. For this reason much effort has been put into developing Older People's Forums throughout the county, much of the impetus for this coming latterly from Age Concern. This year a forum was successfully established in Sherborne to complement those already existing in Dorchester, Bridport, Wool, Weymouth and Portland and other areas of the county. These forums serve to raise the profile of issues that are of particular importance to older people such as public and community transport, benefits, health issues and so on.

## **7. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY**

Forty years ago of course, such a chapter heading would never have appeared! Ten years ago, even five years ago, the focus was very much on training us all on how to use the wonders of new technology and on explaining the uses of e-mail and the Internet. The world of communication technology moves so fast however that much of this knowledge is now taken for granted as commonplace, and as a result many of the IT Learning Centres have either closed or are having to re-invent themselves.

There is still some interest in encouraging older people in particular to learn how to use computers, and various projects have run throughout the year in different parts of the county on this theme. Thus the East Dorset Heritage Trust offered free two

and a half hour courses at any of the local libraries (Corfe Mullen, Lytchett Matravers, Upton etc) funded by UK Online whilst the Yarn Barton centre in Beaminster teamed up with UK Online, Age Concern, the Bridport Older People's Forum and others to introduce the over 50's to the joys of the internet through weekly classes in the villages.

Proving that living in rural Dorset is no bar to competing in our information-rich world Abbotsbury Software <http://www.abbotsbury.com/> received the award of Best Wireless Internet Service Provider (ISP) at the Ispas, the UK Internet industry awards. Using wireless networks, this business provides high-speed internet access for businesses in Dorset and Somerset that cannot access standard internet services because of their rurality. Meanwhile the information technology manager of Blandford School won the telephony project category of the Communications in Business Awards. (Runners-up included Kings College Hospital, the University of Kent and the Natural History Museum).



An innovative project 'Connecting Dorset' finally got the go-ahead in the spring. One thrust of this project is to provide all the village halls in the county with standard ICT facilities and to support them in developing open access public sessions so that local people can easily access online services. The project is quite open so that village halls will be free to develop their own ideas as to uses to which their broadband facility could be put. Another part of the project involves ensuring every parish council in the county is also connected using the same format email address and this should assist the development of 'e-government' at a local level.

## 8. COMMUNITY SAFETY

Dorset continues to be one of the safest parts of the country in which to live. In fact a study by the Eastern Crime and Disorder Partnership revealed that compared to 1998 there has been an overall crime reduction of 54% in Purbeck and the surrounding areas. Similar figures hold true for the rest of the county but unfortunately fear and perception of crime does not appear to match with this reality! Last year saw a big drop in vehicle crime and in house burglaries although there was a very small increase in violent crime compared to the year before. Conviction rates are also amongst the highest in the country.

Anti-social behaviour remains one of the main concerns of Dorset residents. This year Police Community Safety Officers began working with many of the local Housing Associations (Magna, Twynham Housing, Sovereign Housing etc) to reduce low-level crime and nuisance behaviour, such as vandalism or loud noise. CCTV is often seen as a useful tool to combat this and in the summer CCTV was installed at Upwey station in a partnership project between the County Council and South West Trains. The introduction of CCTV at Maiden Newton and Dorchester West stations had been successful in helping reduce the amount of vandalism and it is expected

this will have the same effect at Upwey. More CCTV cameras were also installed in Wareham and Blandford town centres during the course of the year. However there is some disquiet at the number of CCTV cameras, even in very rural locations, now being installed with fears that the effect is merely to displace unwanted behaviours elsewhere and also that they constitute an unwanted intrusion on privacy.

There was a rise in reports of racist incidents in Dorset schools during the year but the rise is actually viewed as positive in the sense that more schools are recognising when an incident is racist. There has been more training for staff in schools and according to the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service pupils are reporting incidents more now that they have greater confidence that the school will take the problem seriously. Most incidents involved verbal abuse. There was also an increase in prosecutions for racially aggravated crimes by the Crown Prosecution Service in Dorset last year, again put down not to an increase in the actual number of incidents, but a greater willingness by victims to report the crime.



Road safety continued to be another major concern of rural residents with many calls for traffic calming measures, speed restrictions and the like from both concerned individuals and parish councils. The issue is frequently highlighted in Parish Plans and many villages have taken to using Speed Indicator Devices (SIDs) in order to improve the situation. In a related issue there has been much campaigning around the county by local groups or forums about making town centres more accessible and safer for users of wheelchairs and mobility scooters.

Domestic violence also had a higher profile this year. A nationwide scheme to introduce 'sanctuaries' in victims' own homes saw six sanctuaries established in Dorset with more planned. Open to victims whose abuser no longer lives with them, the scheme gives victims the option to have a safe room in their home equipped with extra security measures like special locks, a reinforced door, CCTV and fire resistant strips. If their abuser tries to enter the home, the victim and any children can lock themselves in the room and call police using a special mobile phone.

Also this year a drop-in service and helpline for **men** suffering from domestic abuse opened in Dorchester, run by a national charity ManKind <http://www.mankind.org.uk/> with support from the West Dorset Women's Refuge. Men can now drop in on the first Wednesday of every month whilst the helpline is currently available three evenings a week with staff from the women's refuge operating it.

There was plenty of other evidence of organisations and individuals working together constructively to reduce crime. Much of this work involves 'diversionary' activities for young people in particular and is reported on in the next chapter. The police themselves, under the national Safer Neighbourhoods directive, have been tasked with setting up Partners and Communities Together (PACT) meetings. The aim is for members of the public to raise concerns in order to draw up priorities on which issues to tackle first. There is evidence of some disquiet that these groups overlap with or duplicate other community planning initiatives already in place, and also that they may raise unrealistic expectations in the community. On the other hand they have been welcomed in some communities as a constructive way forward. PACT initiatives are already established in certain parts of the county and the intention is for them to expand until eventually they cover all areas.

## 9. PLAY AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Interestingly the needs and views of young people did not figure sufficiently strongly in the early years of Rural Trends reports for any data to be collected on their issues. Today however there is much greater interest. In particular there is now some focus on gathering the views of young people and giving young people a voice. This can be seen in some high-level documents and strategies but on the ground is shown by actions such as the formation and active encouragement of youth forums particularly in West Dorset.

The active involvement of young people has been taken one step further in West Dorset with the formation of the Youth Bank. <http://www.youthbank.org.uk/> Formed by the West Dorset Youth Council, made up of representatives of the four existing forums (Dorchester, Bridport, Beaminster and Lyme Regis) the Youth Bank has obtained a licence from the National Youth Agency and is funded through the National Lottery. Essentially it will operate as a grant-making body managed by young people where young people submit funding applications for their ideas and a panel of young people decide on the merits of the application and whether to approve the project or not. The scheme is currently in its infancy and we hope to report on its operation next year.



Play continued to enjoy a higher profile than in the past both nationally and locally. Nationally the Big Lottery Children's Play Programme was announced and every District or Borough Council in the county was invited to submit bids for play provision of £200,000 each. This should provide a welcome boost to play provision in the county: although not all councils have submitted their bids yet, it appears most of the money will be spent on fixed play equipment.

Locally the Dorset Play Strategy was revised this year and sets out a range of overarching themes and recommendations to improve the access to high quality play opportunities for all the children and young people in the county. The implementation of the play strategy is monitored by the Play Forum, where representatives of all the agencies concerned with play meet regularly.

On the ground, there has again been much local effort to improve play provision. In July a new recreation area opened at Three Legged Cross to complement their existing skate park. The work also involved the creation of a woodland walk on what was formerly uncultivated land and also the installation of a pelican crossing so people could have safe access to the play area and the skate park. This was the culmination of six years' hard work and fund raising with funding received from, amongst others, Living Spaces, the Countryside Agency, Verwood Town Council and East Dorset District Council.

October saw the official opening of the new play area in Blandford St Mary when the old one had fallen into disrepair. The activities of this group of parents were reported on in last year's report and it is good to see their plans come to fruition! In an innovative move, a dozen children have pledged to act as park rangers for the area,

meaning that they take care of the site themselves, keeping it free of litter and reporting any vandalism or graffiti as soon as they spot it.

Numerous other schemes were successfully completed throughout the year in different parts of the county including Redwood Road in Upton, a play area in Frampton, a play area at Hauses Field in Wareham and a new MUGA (multi-user games area) in Maiden Newton. Consultations and fundraising are actively continuing in Abbotsbury, Thornford and Walditch amongst other areas. Funding has now been agreed for the Rixon Road Recreation Ground in Sturminster Newton where a co-operative was formed to raise funds for the refurbishment.

Youth centres, including voluntary ones, had a generally steady year. The Vision Youth Centre in Bovington, whose building is owned by Bovington Garrison, was re-launched in February following a long closure for major refurbishment after flooding in July 2006. There was a major revamp of facilities at the Youth and Community Centre in Dorchester mainly spent on enhancing the facilities for music-making and including a soundproofed studio and multimedia recording facility. Funding was obtained for the project from the Youth Opportunity Fund and the Youth Capital Fund.

Funding was also obtained from the Western Dorset Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership to enable Routes, a drop-in centre in Dorchester to extend its opening hours so that it is now open on a Saturday. The aim is to develop services further with young people involved in both the design of the facilities and the running of the place. In common with most other parts of Dorset, Dorchester had previously had very little provision of services for young people at the weekends.

## **10. EMPLOYMENT**

Employment was only introduced as a chapter heading for the first time last year. It is interesting to note that it was not considered worthy of attention when looking at a national picture of rural trends! Nowadays we are more aware of the importance of employment as a factor in ensuring the development of balanced communities age-wise and in terms of sustainability.

There were several announcements of closures and redundancies throughout the year, some of which initially set alarm bells ringing. For instance when Luhrs Marine, a subsidiary of Hunters Marine, a large manufacturer of sailing yachts, announced the closure of its factory on Portland, despite the fact that Luhrs, which had opened there in 2001 considered its UK investment a success and its workforce highly skilled, this could have been a blow to the marine sector in Dorset with the loss of sixty-five jobs. However in March Sunseeker International Ltd, a Poole based yacht manufacturer, agreed to buy Luhrs' facility and has plans to expand. It hopes ultimately to employ up to five hundred staff at the site as demand for large motorised luxury yachts grows.

There was less happy news for Blandford though when the Ministry of Defence announced its decision to relocate the Defence College to Wales. Research into the impact of the decision on the local economy suggests a direct loss of 4216 jobs (3000 military and 1216 other) and a loss of £285m per annum into the local economy. The Regional Development Agency, business leaders and local councillors are working hard to both get firm details from the Ministry of Defence and develop plans to overcome the job losses.

Also in North Dorset, Faccenda announced their intention to close their chicken factory in Okeford Fitzpaine in August with around 120 people affected. The company, JobCentrePlus and the District Council have been working closely together and most of the employees have skills that are wanted in the local labour market. The closure is not seen as an unmitigated disaster by residents however, as over the years the factory has been the source of many complaints over noise, smells and traffic. This illustrates a common tension in rural communities over reconciling the needs of businesses, particularly as regards lorry movements, and residents wish for a quiet rural idyll!



A sign of the times in North Dorset was the decision of the last dairy farmer in Stoke Wake, near Sturminster Newton, to sell up after 150 years of the family running a dairy farm. This is the last of the seventeen dairy farms operating in the parish when the farmer was born.

The announcement by Barclays that it intended to shed over a thousand jobs over the next three years in Poole, together with the closure of Poole Pottery after 130 years of pottery making in the town was also bad news for Dorset residents, many of whom commute into Poole and Bournemouth for work. However job prospects still look good in the area as indeed they do in North Dorset. In fact the October 2006 figures for claimants show the Dorset (DCC) unemployment rate was only 1%. The rate is highest in Weymouth and Portland but even here is under 2%. The rural rate outside towns for Dorset stands at 0.7%.

The sector does not seem to be complacent however and there are efforts to support growth and regeneration. For example a charity known as Thomson Engineering Skills Centre <http://www.tesc-etf.org.uk/> has successfully launched 'Engineering the Future of Manufacturing', a two-year pilot scheme to support business growth in Dorset to combat emerging skills shortages in engineering and manufacturing. The initiative also offers redeployment and short-term secondment opportunities for employees faced with redundancy, and for companies facing a downturn in business. Central to the project is a website database providing a free staffing service with an automated skills matching service.

Attempts to secure the economic regeneration of Weymouth and Portland took on a promising aspect with the announcement that the Weymouth and Portland National Sailing Academy at Osprey Quay would form the venue for the Sailing events for the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympic Games. It is anticipated that this will raise the profile of the area as a sailing venue and as a more general tourist destination. The 2013 Rural Trends report should make interesting reading in this regard!

Another issue that has been much in the national news recently is that of migrant workers. There has been an influx of mainly Polish workers into the area, working predominantly in the care sector, leisure and tourism. A Polish mass is now held once a month in Weymouth attended by between fifty and seventy people. Although the majority of the workers are young and single there has also been a small number of enrolments of Polish children in the local schools (ten at St Augustine's, the Catholic primary school in Weymouth).

## 11. CULTURE AND THE ARTS



Last year saw the first time a chapter on culture and the arts had been included in Rural Trends in recognition of the fact that these form an important part of life in the countryside. Dwarfing all other issues last year was the shock announcement by the County Council that it was considering closing thirteen of its smallest libraries, most of them in rural towns and larger villages such as Chickerell, Corfe Castle, Corfe Mullen and Stalbridge. The proposal certainly galvanised local communities into action, mainly in the form of protest petitions, demonstrations, read-ins and the like.

As a result of the outcry and a sustained and joint campaign from the thirteen communities affected the libraries were given a reprieve for a two-year, rather than a six-week, consultation period. It now looks likely that there will be no closures and savings (from the book fund, shorter opening hours and so on) will be made across all the libraries.

[http://www.dorsetecho.co.uk/mostpopular.var.1538372.mostcommented.library\\_fight\\_ends\\_in\\_deal.php](http://www.dorsetecho.co.uk/mostpopular.var.1538372.mostcommented.library_fight_ends_in_deal.php) There will be much more encouragement for communities to assist (as opposed to run) their local library however, through means such as volunteers, fund-raising, paying for additional opening hours and so on.

In many other ways the library service has shown itself to be innovative. It has pioneered the use of e-mails and text messages to communicate with readers and is working to re-engage young people through out-of-hours sessions. Also as the result of a successful Lottery Bid The Reading Agency, a national charity, received funding to set up twenty 'book bars' throughout the country and one of the chosen locations is Lyme Regis Library. The aim is to entice teenagers into using the library by running a youth café where 'Book Waiters' will supply books and magazines along with the coffee!

There continues to be much interest in what could loosely be termed 'heritage' issues. The Heritage Lottery Fund awarded the Purbeck Heritage Committee over £1.4 million pounds this year which, when combined with match funding, gave them a total of £2m for a project known as The Purbeck Keystone Project (previously known as 'Carving a Foundation for the Isle of Purbeck'). The Project relies on a wide range of community partners and volunteers to work together to provide a long-term, self-sustainable future for the unique landscapes of Purbeck. It works under three main headings, Natural Landscape, Cultural Landscape and Outdoor Learning. The Cultural Landscape projects focus on the importance of Purbeck stone and in particular the development of a Stone Centre at quarry buildings near Langton Matravers where stoneworking skills can be learned. The Outdoor Learning projects will promote Purbeck as a place for outdoor learning with improvements to the footpaths and cycleways also included to make the landscape more accessible for this.

Also in Purbeck the Heritage Lottery Fund gave approval for the Durlston Project which means £3.23m has been earmarked by the HLF to support the development of Durlston as the eastern gateway to the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. The grant is being used to renovate and restore Durlston Castle as the focal point of the park. The Friends of Durlston as well as staff and consultants play an important part

in shaping the project and emphasise the importance of the involvement of the local community in arts and culture projects.

The HLF also gave a much smaller grant (£129,000) for a two year oral history project in West Dorset known as The Spinning Yarns. Run by the Bridport Museum the project sets out, using local volunteers, to collect the memories of local people and to keep a record of those recollections as an archive to enrich the understanding of how local industries such as rope and net making influenced people's lives as well as other aspects of rural life.

Nearby in Burton Bradstock the new West Dorset Research Centre opened its doors in October. A determined band of volunteers had made this centre for local and family history a reality. Its particular focus is that of migration FROM Dorset and one of its chief focuses is building a database of people who have moved from Dorset since the 1600's. It received grant funding from the HLF and also from Chalk and Cheese as well as its own efforts.

There were some other interesting developments in Dorset's museums (almost all of which are run as charities). In Sturminster Newton the Town Council, which is relocating from its current premises in Old Market Cross House to offices in The Exchange (see Chapter 2) resolved not to put the property onto the open market but to sell it to the Museum Society for £150,000. The museum is taking out a large mortgage to fund this but have raised, or are in the process of raising the rest from intensive fundraising. £10,000 has been raised by the sales of their book 'STUR: the Story of Sturminster Newton'.

Meanwhile, in an enormous project that may ultimately create more than a hundred new jobs, the Bovington Tank Museum received £1.5m from the Regional Development Agency together with a £9.5m grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The museum will be completely re-developed with the construction of a new 5000 square metre display hall and it will have to close for the coming winter in order to transform the floor plan. The project is scheduled for completion in March 2009.

Elsewhere the Arts Council gave a grant of £350,000 to Holton Lee to help establish a National Disability Arts Collection and Archive. The money will be used to provide a purpose built building as well as a web-based archive but a further £450,000 is required to complete all aspects of the project so plenty of fund-raising is envisaged!

In Dorchester the Dorchester Community Plays Association set about in earnest organising for its fifth community play to be performed in the autumn. Professionally written and directed, the community play involves members of the community in all other aspects of the production (including, most importantly the acting!) and is written specifically for the town and is about the town, about real historical figures, a drama surrounding a particular aspect of Dorchester's history. Previous community plays have been very well received and indeed the very first Dorchester community play 'Entertaining Strangers' was later produced at the West End with Dame Judi Dench in a starring role.

Festivals have become an important feature of the arts scene in the county over recent years with many of them growing and developing. The Wimborne Folk Festival is of course a regular feature and the Swanage Jazz Festival celebrated its 16<sup>th</sup> year in July 2006. The Dorchester Arts Festival received £48,000 from the Arts Council South West and this combined with other grants from local authorities enabled it to run its seventh festival.

Festivals with an emphasis on food have become particularly important. In September Sturminster Newton held its eighth annual Cheese Festival, which not only celebrated Dorset food (and crafts) but also raised over £8,000 for local good causes. Shaftesbury held its third Local Food Festival in May and this has proved very successful too. The focus is very much on the word 'local' and the aim is to introduce people to the range of good food grown and produced in the Blackmore Vale.

So much goes on in the county under the arts and culture banner that the above can only give a flavour – the chapter could equally well have focussed on Beaminster Festival, the new room at The Calvacade of Costume museum in Blandford, the new Portland Heritage Study Centre, the third year of the Gillingham Festival and much else besides. What is apparent is that there is still considerable interest in the county in this area of life and certain aspects such as our built heritage, our memories, our food seem to be of particular and special importance to us.

## **12. OTHER ISSUES**

As reported last year, financial exclusion and problems of debt loom as important challenges these days. In fact figures published by the credit reference agency Experian in February showed that Weymouth is one of the UK's top ten bankruptcy hotspots (with six out of the top ten being towns in the south west). Its research suggests that the gap between wages and house prices could be part of the cause.

Credit unions are seen as one of the vehicles for improving this situation. After many years of hard work, as reported on last year, the Blackmore Vale Credit Union group decided that the best solution for them would be to become part of the First Dorset Credit Union. This involved detailed negotiations with the Financial Services Authority but the extension of the 'common bond' from West Dorset and Weymouth and Portland to include all of the Blackmore Vale has now been agreed. Hopefully next year's report will detail new service points opening throughout North Dorset. A new service point was opened this year in Sherborne in any case to add to the ones already existing in Dorchester, Bridport, Weymouth and Portland.

The Citizens' Advice Bureaux reported an increase in the number of people with debt problems in Dorchester with a 50% increase in cases dealt with by their CAB. The three bureaux in West Dorset ( Bridport, Dorchester and Sherborne) received a grant of £50,000 for an Access Project to help them work more closely together and deliver improved services to the public. In Sherborne for example the CAB has introduced an automated telephone advice centre and has started outreach sessions once a week in the RendezVous, a drop-in centre for young people in the town, as part of an effort to attract younger clients to access CAB services.

Green issues continued to be of importance this year, although evidence of interest and concern in the issue has not as yet developed into many signs of active projects and campaigns. The county's residents continue to do well as far as recycling is concerned: in fact Weymouth and Portland now have recycling and composting rates that make them one of the best-performing areas in the UK. In West Dorset the kerbside recycling service was extended to include batteries and has so far also proved very successful. Overall Dorset residents recycled 42% of our household waste over the past year.



A trial recycling scheme based at the Whitfield Rural Activities Centre was launched in April. Run by the Dorset Primary Care Trust and known as Foiled Again, the project uses volunteers and clients with mental health problems to collect foil from recycling banks in West Dorset and Weymouth and Portland and to sort, crush and sell it. In another initiative two recycling organisations – Bridport TLC and Dorset Reclaim – have teamed up with Powergen to distribute low energy light bulbs to people on low incomes to help them save money and reduce energy use.

Dorset Reclaim is a long established charity that originally opened in Bournemouth in 1998 that collects unwanted second-hand furniture and electrical goods and other household items and supplies them at affordable prices to people on low incomes. Thus the work is of dual benefit helping the environment as well as people on low income. It opened a new depot in Dorchester in the winter of 2006 complementing the work of similar schemes operating in Stalbridge and Weymouth.

Bridport TLC <http://www.bridport-tlc.org.uk/> diverts waste from landfill sites by collecting and recycling cardboard, paper and plastics from local businesses and in particular runs a bio-diesel project where it obtains used cooking oil from the local crisp factory and other outlets and converts it into bio-diesel. This oil was used by over forty business and family vehicles in 2006 who thus reduced the CO2 emissions around west Dorset by over sixteen tons. It has plans to launch a Re-paint project providing a recycling base to divert unwanted paint from expensive waste processing, which can be used by community groups / projects and people on low incomes. This is a community enterprise that was only started at the end of 2005 and has clearly developed very fast.

The Dorset Climate Change Coalition was also formed, a coalition of many agencies including the County Council, Dorset Agenda 21, Dorset Wildlife Trust, Dorset Community Action, Churches Together and the Dorset Federation of Women's Institutes amongst others. Their mission statement is '*By working together, to communicate with the people of Dorset the urgency of action on Climate Change and to enable and inspire them to take action, both individually and collectively, to address this*'.

In another interesting move the residents of Shipton Gorge raised more than £16,000 in order to buy a plot of land to safeguard it against developers and keep it in trust for the benefit of the villagers. The land is now owned by a charitable company and plans are afoot to turn it into a community orchard. (Community orchards are becoming increasingly popular in Dorset with ones established in Shillingstone, Shaftesbury, Symondsburry, Broad Oak and Charminster). Shipton Gorge is also the village that is currently running its own community pub so demonstrates no lack of community spirit.

In fact a thread running throughout this report is that, although there is a shortage of volunteers in some areas, in other respects the community appears to be ready to take action. Although much of the basic infrastructure – schools, healthcare, roads, public transport, employment - may be in the hands of local and central government or of commerce and business - in many other ways local people are influencing and altering the direction of their lives and improving and moulding their communities as they see fit.



**DORSET COMMUNITY ACTION**

Registered Charity No: 1060910 Company Registration No: 3320011



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