



**Dorset
Community
Action**

RURAL TRENDS IN DORSET

OCTOBER 2010 – DECEMBER 2010

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
Company Registration Number: 3320011

CONTENTS	PAGE
INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS	3
1. VILLAGE SHOPS, PUBS AND POST OFFICES	3
2. VILLAGE AND COMMUNITY HALLS	4
3. SCHOOLS AND CHILDCARE	4
4. TRANSPORT	5
5. HOUSING	6
6. HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE	8
7. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION	9
8. COMMUNITY SAFETY	10
9. PLAY AND YOUNG PEOPLE	11
10. EMPLOYMENT	12
11. ARTS AND CULTURE	13

INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS

Well, this quarter has been a bit of a roller-coaster ride. This, our fourth quarterly Rural Trends report shows some of the current round of spending cuts beginning to take effect. We are still of course unclear of all the details but the broad outlines are showing. We know that there will be substantial job losses at the County Council and that some frontline services will be affected - a few, such as libraries and day centres, quite severely affected.

Unfortunately, as you will read further on in this report, a few local voluntary organisations have gone under in the current economic climate and others have had to retrench and reduce their services. Others however are beginning to regroup and prepare to meet the challenges ahead. Local communities too are looking at how to respond to a new government agenda of localism and the Big Society and to see whether it is possible to use these new opportunities to shape their communities in ways that respond better to local needs. New government legislation, in particular the Decentralisation and Localism Bill may alter the landscape in which we live and work quite considerably. Proposed changes in planning and housing may also over time lead to a substantial change in the composition of rural communities.

1. VILLAGE SHOPS, PUBS AND POST OFFICES

Keeping village shops, pubs and post offices going in these difficult times is a challenge for all our rural communities. Post offices in particular have found it increasingly a struggle to maintain services when existing postmasters or postmistresses choose to retire or to sell their shops. A new hosted service has opened in the White Horse in Stourpaine available six hours a week on Tuesday and Thursday mornings with the postmistress from Child Okeford in attendance. The post office has been closed since April but after months of hard work by parish and county councillors along with Dorset Community Action, has now re-opened. The landlord is serving tea and coffee too when the post office is open and has also begun stocking some basics such as eggs and cereals. This should prove a very welcome service to the village.

A similar replacement service is still planned for Shillingstone but has not yet been achieved. Proposed changes at Post Office Ltd, including making redundant key staff involved in assisting communities in finding replacement services do not make this process any easier. The village shop at Hazelbury Bryan closes its doors on New Year's Eve and once again the hunt is on to find suitable premises from which to run the Post Office services currently run from the shop.

Not all is total gloom on the village shop front however. Plans to turn Bishop's Caundle shop and post office into a co-operative are progressing well. The intention is to take over the existing shop when the owners retire. The project has full backing from Sherborne Castle Estate who own the shop premises and is also receiving support from the Plunkett Foundation. There are also plans progressing to open a community shop in Trent by building an extension to the village hall. There used to be a village shop in Trent until around three years ago when it became unviable. Some of the village residents are unhappy at the idea of an extension being built on the land next to the hall and are petitioning to have the land designated as a Village Green, in which case it could not be built upon. Doubtless we will be reporting on this again in the near future!

On the pub front The Old Swan at Toller Porcorum was put up for sale at auction by Palmers Brewery on 16th December in Toller Village Hall. Conditions of the 999 year lease include that the buyer must continue to stock draught beer from the brewery for the duration of the lease. Local residents speculate that this plus the guide price of £175,000 are intended to dissuade potential purchasers and thus provide evidence for

the brewery that the building cannot be run viably as a pub and hence they should be allowed to have change of use to residential.

Wiggles Farm Shop was officially opened in November. Following the closure of the village shop in Chetnole at the end of 2009 the owner of the Chetnole Inn decided to convert an under-used skittle alley into a farm produce shop, open seven days a week and focussing on fresh, local produce. The shop was opened by Sue Fudge of Fudge's Biscuits, one of the many local suppliers whose goods the shop stocks. Another farm shop, Oakleigh Farm Shop in Yetminster, is also hoping to expand. Currently the owners run a smallholding and sell the produce from a converted garage. However the business has now grown so much it requires new premises and plans have been submitted to construct a purpose-built timber framed shop on the site.

In Stourton Caundle the owners of the Trooper Inn have decided to open a village shop at the pub, the first in the village for many years, as well as extending the opening hours so that they are open in the mornings for newspapers and morning coffee. The shop will be open from Tuesdays to Saturdays selling a range of basic items such as milk and teabags plus fresh vegetables and bread baked on the premises.

2. VILLAGE AND COMMUNITY HALLS

As we reported last quarter the County Council intends ending its capital grant scheme for village halls in the next financial year. There is still plenty of work going on currently though to improve and maintain village halls across the county. Gussage St Michael's village hall was officially re-opened in November after a £97,000 refit. Plans to refurbish the hall, actually the old village school, began ten years ago with a Community Hall Association established three years ago. More than half of the funding came from a £50,000 grant from Biffaward using landfill tax credits. With a new kitchen, double glazing and underfloor heating the hall is now fit for the 21st century.

This is likely to be one of the last times we will see such a scheme in the county for quite a while. However many smaller schemes are going ahead. For example in Manston the committee has been able to complete a new hard standing for its car park with the help of a grant from the parish council and from Signpost's Residents Community Fund. The hall has also recently added a new ramp for disabled access and redecorated the interior of the hall. Toller Porcorum's village hall is now much warmer thanks to the six new infra-red heaters as well as the new floor mentioned in the last report.

A well-known business guru Wolfgang Grulke gave a talk in Sherborne on how to make the most of emerging trends with the proceeds going towards the maintenance and refurbishment of Osborne Village Hall. This is a project Mr Grulke has supported enthusiastically since he moved to the village three years ago. Meanwhile Purbeck District Council agreed a grant of £25,000 to Wool Parish Council towards the cost of building a new extension to the D'Urbeville Hall on condition that the money would only become available once all the other funding was in place.

3. SCHOOLS AND CHILDCARE

This quarter saw the unveiling of the new £3.5 million building at Downlands Primary School situated inside Blandford Camp. This project had been delayed when the future of the camp was under review but got the go-ahead once its future role was confirmed. The building includes many environmentally friendly features such as a living roof. It also features a new Key Stage 2 wing, a library, group rooms, music / drama room and ICT area. The school also now has landscaped parking, a new school entrance, new administration offices, and a new hot meal kitchen / servery for the 210 pupils. As the

school serves mainly service personnel the turnover of pupils is very high and high quality school premises help to boost morale and mitigate the effect of constantly changing classes.

A new building was also opened in Bridport when St Catherine's Pre-school was re-housed after a two year project. The old premises were in such a poor state they did not meet statutory requirements and it even looked at one stage as if the pre-school would have to close. However a £150,000 grant from the SureStart programme together with local fundraising allowed the project to go ahead.

News on the education front is not so promising for the future however, as the proposed County Council cuts include a reduction of £193,000 in the music service and of £650,000 on careers advice and support to sixteen – nineteen year olds. It is also proposed that the council no longer pays for school crossing patrols but that these should be done by volunteers, either from the community or from amongst the parents, thus saving £200,000.

Education officers at County Hall are also waiting anxiously to hear the details of the proposed "pupil premium." Under these plans, additional money will go to a school each year according to the number of pupils it has on free school meals. However there are apparently only six schools in Dorset likely to benefit from this. The pupil premium will in effect move money away from places like Dorset into the inner cities and other more deprived areas than ours.

In addition, following on from the decision to abandon the previous government's Building Schools for the Future programme, capital spending is being cut by 60%. This means some capital projects in Dorset such as the plans for a Portland Academy are not guaranteed to be funded. However the plans to turn Purbeck into a two tier system from a three tier one are safe as the money for this has already been agreed.

On the plus side, the government's decision to alter the threshold at which a school is considered to be failing from 30% achieving grades A* - C to 35% achieving grades A* - C will have no effect in the county. This is because currently no school has less than 40% of pupils achieving grades A* - C.

4. TRANSPORT

There has been relatively little news on the transport front this quarter (apart from the general chaos caused by the snow of course!). The route 47 Sunday service between Bridport and Yeovil which was trialled for a six month period last April was considered sufficiently successful for it to be continued until April 2011. The bus runs three times a day via Bradpole, Beaminster and Broadwindsor but passenger numbers will have to be high enough for it to be considered viable to continue. At the moment numbers do not appear high enough to justify its continuation.

Campaigners in Bridport were delighted to finally get their bus stops back on Sea Road South. Five years ago the 435 bus was re-routed to ease traffic congestion but the police prevented the buses from stopping along Sea Road South. However, after long and patient negotiations with the Highways Agency in particular, there are now four bus stops back on this road meaning passengers from Burton Bradstock and other areas now have an hourly bus service to the supermarket.

The County Council were pleased with the passenger numbers on the experimental X43 bus service between Swanage and Weymouth over the summer. These averaged out at thirty-nine passengers per journey which surely should be high enough for the service to run again next summer!

Yet another NeighbourCar scheme got off the ground this quarter, this time in Dorchester. Supported by NHS Dorset and POPP, who provided the start up funding, this scheme is designed to help anyone who has a disability or is otherwise infirm, to get to all their health related appointments – not just the doctors but also hospital outpatients, support groups, opticians, dentist etc. You have to pay a one off membership fee of £5 and then 50p per mile for the actual journey you make. NeighbourCar schemes are already running in areas as diverse as West Moors, Upton, Milton Abbas, Puddletown and Ferndown. On a less positive note however, it was announced that Portland Community Minibus would stop running after Christmas as the age of the vehicle and the costs of repairs no longer made it economical to run it.

In April concessionary fares (bus passes) will be run as a countywide scheme, rather than through the district and borough councils as at present. The national scheme allows travel after 9.30 am but some of our local councils (West Dorset, Christchurch, and East Dorset) have allowed holders of the passes to use them earlier in the day. A consultation is currently taking place but it seems likely that from April bus pass holders throughout the county will only be able to use their passes after 9.30.

5. HOUSING

Nationally the picture for housing is changing very rapidly. The national affordable housing programme has been cut very substantially – by 60% in cash terms – although all existing commitments will be honoured. However it appears that allocations will be made on an individual basis to housing associations coming forward with schemes rather than regionally in future – which may actually mean cuts are slightly less than 60% in the southwest. Nevertheless this clearly means a very large reduction in the amount of money available for building new affordable housing and as we know this is an area of very great concern in Dorset.

Latest statistics, produced by the National Housing Federation, show East Dorset is the most expensive district in the county in which to live, with the average house costing £268,931, 13 times the average income of £20,748. Other parts of the county are nearly as expensive however with Christchurch at £252,564 (15.4 times the average income of £16,442) and even the least expensive district, Weymouth and Portland showing average house prices of £189,438 (10.1 times the average income of £18,741).

As far as social housing is concerned the government is proposing some far reaching changes. These will not affect existing tenants but the main proposal is that there should be a new “affordable rent”, the details of which are too complicated for this report, but would probably typically be set at around 80% of the market rent. This would represent a substantial increase on the current average rent for social housing. For instance it is calculated by the National Housing Federation that in West Dorset this would probably mean an average rent for a two bedroom house would be £110 a week as against a current average of £76 a week. Tenancies on this model could also be for a much shorter term than at present, where they are held for life. Indeed it is also proposed that housing associations should be free to offer new social rents on shorter tenancies than currently.

The thinking behind the proposal is that the higher rents charged could be re-invested in further development, thereby finding the money for more building. Also it is thought that shorter tenancies will give more people the opportunity to access social housing. However unanswered questions are whether prospective tenants will be able to afford the new rent levels and whether the lack of security for tenants will lead to less community cohesion. Also the fear of losing a tenancy because one is perceived to be in less need may perversely act as a deterrent to improving household income.

There are a variety of other proposals to do with housing benefit in particular that are calculated to have a big impact on claimants' ability to meet their housing costs. At the moment if you are in private rented accommodation there is a calculation of what the average market rent is for such accommodation and housing benefit is not paid above that amount. However it is intended that in future housing benefit will be based on average rents in the 30th percentile rather than the midpoint. Such a change is likely to affect virtually all current claimants for housing benefit and clearly means that fewer properties in the private rented sector will be available for housing benefits claimants to rent. According to government statistics currently just over half of private rented accommodation is available at the rates set for housing benefit but after the changes it is calculated that for example in West Dorset the amount available would be only 35%.

There are grave fears that the benefit changes may have a significant damaging effect on the ability of households to meet their housing costs and could in the long run lead to a great deal more homelessness. Clearly only time will tell if these fears are justified and we will keep a close eye on what is happening on the housing front over the next reports.

Over the years Dorset local authorities have worked hard to increase the availability of affordable housing and to reduce their waiting lists. In North Dorset for example there has been a steady reduction in the numbers on the waiting list for housing from 2098 in 2005 to 1051 in 2009. It looks unlikely that this steady reduction can be maintained however.

Locally Purbeck District Council has compulsorily purchased a former baker's shop with a flat above in Swanage that had stood empty for many years. It is hoped this can now be converted into affordable homes for local people. The council were unable to find the owner and eventually decided the only prospect of getting the property back into use was by compulsory purchase. Unsurprisingly it is in a poor state of repair but may still be able to be returned to a useful purpose.

Also in Purbeck a caravan site owner was successfully prosecuted for breaching the terms of his licence. The owner of the Silent Woman caravan park at Coldharbour, Wareham was fined and ordered to pay costs when the electricity failed on one of the coldest nights of the year in 2009. The electricity system had become overloaded but the owner did not call out Southern and Scottish Energy emergency engineers but arranged for an electrician to visit the next day. Several elderly residents live on the site and one was admitted to hospital with suspected hypothermia.

A scaled down version of a housing development was supported by town councillors in Dorchester. Originally the developers had wanted to build twenty-four new affordable homes but this was rejected as an over-development so now new plans have been submitted for eight. The extra-care housing scheme in Blandford reported on previously suffered a setback in November when Rok went into administration. It had been hoped tenants could move in before Christmas but it now looks as though they will have to wait until late March or April.

On the refuge front West Dorset Women's Refuge was full for Christmas as usual as it has been for the twelve years it has been in operation. There is room at the refuge for eight families and new accommodation now allows single women and older women to find refuge from domestic violence. Campaigners for the Weymouth Refuge saw a glimmer of hope in December when Magna Housing expressed an interest in taking over the building and using it as a half way house by converting it into three or four flats as move-on accommodation for victims of domestic violence and their children. The

idea is this would free up emergency places in the other refuges in the county. We should know more about progress on this by the time of the next report.

There continues to be much interest in Community Land Trusts in the county. In Symondsburry the Symene CLT has submitted a proposal to the District Council on behalf of a partnership between the CLT, Hastoe Housing and a local landowner for ten homes and some allotments. A steering group has been set up in Marshwood to explore a similar approach to that of the Symene land trust. In another interesting development, proposals are being developed for four homes and a community centre in Highcliffe.

6. HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE

Clearly the future for health and community care is looking far less rosy than it has been. The County Council is proposing substantial cuts in services such as reducing the number of day centres, saving £861,600 and reducing the subsidy for transport and meals to Learning and Disability Day Centres saving £483,000. There is a particular concern in Gillingham that this will mean the closure of the only day centre in Gillingham, only open for two days a week in any case, leading people to have to make long journeys by minibus to Shaftesbury for day care. Because of the number of people who have to be picked up en route and the frailty of those involved, this can lead to very long and tiring journeys.

The County Council also propose to save a quarter of a million pounds on youth services, to reduce the level of provision for simple aids for daily living to support people in their own homes by £145,000 and to reduce the range of support services to families with children experiencing difficulties by £100,000.

The Waves project, based in Weymouth and the biggest provider of family and children's services in Weymouth and Portland have been told by the County Council that their contract, worth £80,000 will not be renewed after the end of March. Although Waves had been expecting a decrease in funding they had not expected it to be so large. They have some other contracts in place and the parent charity, The Children's Society, have also been putting in £157,000 a year but they are certain they will not be able to continue to provide the same level of service in the future as they are at present.

Even on the health front where cuts have been less severe, there are cutbacks looming. For example a pilot project is planned to reduce the opening hours of some minor injuries units to between 10.30 am and 6 pm for six months from 1st February. The plans affect the units at Bridport, Blandford, Portland and Swanage and are intended to save £300,000. There is much local opposition and fears that, although designated a "pilot", in fact the reduced hours will remain permanently. It has also been agreed that in future women under thirty or over thirty-five will no longer be eligible for fertility treatment on the NHS in Dorset.

More positively the latest patient satisfaction survey reveals a very high level of satisfaction with Dorset County Hospital's maternity unit. 100% of respondents rated the care they received during labour as good, very good or excellent with 95% giving the same rating to care received after birth. Sixty-five units throughout the country were surveyed and DCH had the highest results on a number of areas such as providing pain relief during labour and the only area really showing room for improvement was the provision of antenatal classes.

On the social care front the services provided for adults by the County Council were officially rated according to the Care Quality Commission as consistently delivering above minimum standards, as cost effective and as contributing towards wider

outcomes for the community. The commission thought Dorset had a clear vision for social care and that the outlook for improvements was promising. It is to be hoped that it is possible to maintain this at a time of such major spending cuts.

One of the features praised by the commission was that voluntary organisations are thriving and accessible. Unfortunately however some voluntary organisations are now finding things very difficult. For example Dorset Association for the Disabled, which acts as an umbrella organisation for all its individual branches, is in the process of winding up although the branches will continue to function as independent organisations. NordDis, the North Dorset Disability Information Service, has lost a £16,000 grant from the County Council. This organisation has been providing advice and subsidised equipment for disabled people for fifteen years. It offers free advice on topics such as disability benefits and transport and a home visit service too. Its service level agreement with the County Council will not be renewed in April and although it intends to continue if at all possible it certainly will be unable to offer the same level of service as it does at present.

In Purbeck there is much disquiet about the lack of places in care homes since the closure of the James Day Home in Swanage. A Committee for the Care Provision for Older People in Swanage has been formed and is very active. Also on the subject of care homes sixteen residents of Hyde Crook House in Frampton had to be re-housed very suddenly after the owner decided it was not financially sustainable to keep it open. It appears the council reminded the owner of the staffing levels required for the care home based on the nursing needs and dependency level of the residents. The only way the owner could fulfil those requirements was to employ agency staff and that was not financially viable.

On a more positive note Dorset People First have received £287,126 from the Big Lottery Fund to run its friendship club for the next three years. Dorset People First provide activities for over four hundred members including theatre and cinema trips, outings to pubs and cafés and going to sporting events and music festivals. Groups meet around the county in places as varied as Dorchester, Bridport, Weymouth, Sherborne, Stalbridge and Wimborne. It is hoped the grant will mean they can develop the friendship club more in east Dorset in particular. (www.dorsetpeoplefirst.co.uk/projects/friendship_club.htm)

7. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

One of the main issues continues to be the campaign for improved broadband in the county. High speed rural broadband is, it is agreed across the political spectrum, one area which needs investment on a large scale if the rural economy is to keep up with the rest of the country. With this in mind the community partnership executive for North Dorset (CPEND) agreed to extend the deadline for completion of a survey to 17th December. Plans for students from The Blandford School to canvass people in the Market Place had to be abandoned due to the weather. The hope is the survey will provide useful data on both speed and usage locally to aid the campaign to improve provision.

Elsewhere free sessions to improve computer and internet skills were offered by the Library Service together with Dorset Adult Learning following funding from UK Online. Sessions were held in Christchurch, Dorchester, Gillingham, Swanage, Wareham and Weymouth. In Puddletown, the Friends of Puddletown Library have been very active in providing free courses on the basics of computing after obtaining funding to buy three computers and a broadband connection, (a service that will presumably be lost if the library is closed, see chapter 11). Free IT sessions were also organised across a variety of Village Halls in the county such as Leigh, Charlton Marshall and Briantspuddle

in a unique collaboration between Dorset Adult Learning, Dorset Youth Association and Dorset Community Action. The courses included a session on the fun and dangers associated with social networking, run by DYA and fair trade tea and coffee was served too!

Youth workers across Dorset, along with social workers, teachers and other professionals all came together for a special conference in October to learn about the potential dangers of the internet as far as children are concerned. Themes included grooming, cyber-bullying and so on and delegates were shown how to avoid the potential risks when using chat rooms and social networking sites such as Facebook.

Several Dorset communities, including Stalbridge, set their sights on the BT Race to Infinity competition. Communities could vote online for their area to become one of the first to have fibre optic broadband brought to it with BT also donating computer equipment worth £5,000 to a local community project. Unfortunately no Dorset community was successful.

8. COMMUNITY SAFETY

Of course, the big story on community safety is yet again the proposed cuts in both the police and the fire service. The county's chief fire officer has warned that the proposed 25% cut in government grant to the fire service will make the service "almost unviable". The service currently has a budget of £29 million of which £11 million comes from central government. This is set to be reduced by 25%, meaning a loss of £2.75 million next financial year. However the service has already been judged by the Audit Commission as providing a cost effective service with limited scope for making further savings.

Although the figures for the police force have yet to be finalised, cuts are expected to be in the region of 14% and again are bound to have an effect on frontline services. There are particular fears that as a result of further budget cuts in 2012, the police will have an inadequate budget to police the Olympics effectively when they come to Weymouth and Portland in 2012.

On a more encouraging note, crime figures for 2010 show yet another fall with total crime now at a twelve year low. Total violent crime reduced by 11.1% compared to 2009, a six year low. Sexual offences reduced by 6.7% while vehicle crime fell by 16%, the lowest level of vehicle crime for fifteen years. There was also a sharp decline in arrests for anti-social behaviour although there were rises in robbery and drug related offences. The challenge, according to the Chief Constable, will be to maintain these good figures with such a considerable reduction in spending.

An interesting, if rather unexpected finding of some research done by the local paper, the Dorset Echo, revealed that the number of pensioners arrested for criminal offences has risen substantially in recent years. For example across Weymouth, Portland, Dorchester and Bridport the number of people aged over seventy arrested had risen from thirty in 2007 to fifty-three in 2009. Although these numbers are still small, they are nevertheless slightly shocking and no-one seems quite sure why this should be the case. It may of course be that the crimes were actually committed a good many years ago and better methods of investigating crime (DNA etc) mean that only now are these crimes being solved.

There was much anxiety and anger on Portland when it was announced that the coastguard station was likely to close. The government intends closing ten coastguard stations, including Portland where twenty-eight people are employed, and to only have three centres around the whole coastline open twenty-four hours a day with five sub

centres open during daylight hours. The nearest centre to the Dorset coast will be at Falmouth.

Road safety continues to be an issue across the county. An elderly resident of Burton Bradstock contacted the Department of Transport after three crashes in three weeks on the coast road of the B3157. Maintenance work has now been carried out so that the route between Chickerell and Bradpole has new and improved cats' eyes.

The police have continued with their highly successful "No excuse" campaign to clamp down on road safety issues such as using mobile phones whilst driving or not wearing seat belts. This quarter the police targeted the county town in a one day blitz and detected 106 offences, including forty people not wearing a seat belt, twenty people with no MOT, twenty-seven people exceeding the speed limit in a 30 mph zone and eleven people driving whilst on their mobile phone.

There has also been a launch of new hate crime reporting centres. Essentially research has shown that many people who have been the victim of a hate crime don't feel comfortable reporting such a crime to the police. So such victims now have the opportunity of talking to trained staff about what has happened to them at other centres such as the local district council offices or the tenants of Magna, Hastoe or Sovereign housing can report such crimes to one of their local offices. (www.dorsetforyou.com/hatecrime).

9. PLAY AND YOUNG PEOPLE

This quarter saw the opening of several new play facilities in various parts of the county. A four year project to develop a £158,000 skate bowl, multi use games area (MUGA) and youth shelter finally came to fruition at Crossways when the new facilities were officially opened by the Lord Lieutenant of Dorset, Mrs Valerie Pitt-Rivers. The young chairman of the Crossways Young People's Group, who had been invited to meet the Queen the previous week, showed Mrs Pitt-Rivers and other guests round the new development.

On a smaller scale a new play park was opened at Long Bredy, with a child selected by lot cutting the ribbon. The climbing frame has been refurbished and a new slide installed thanks to £10,000 of Lottery money and a smaller sum from the District Council. A new play area also opened in Shroton (North Dorset) after two and a half years of fundraising. More than £50,000 was raised, the bulk of it from the Big Lottery community spaces programme (£40,570) but smaller sums also came from North Dorset's community partnership, Signpost Housing, Hall and Woodhouse Community Chest and other community donations. The Play Area Action Group chose the new facilities which include a baby swing, see-saw, roundabout, springer and rocking horse plus a new fence, gates, seating and safety matting.

Yet another play park was opened in Buckland Newton after the Buckland Newton Community Steering Group obtained £50,000 from Groundwork UK. The new facilities include a four-tower wooden climbing structure with two slides, various different kinds of swings and a roundabout, with a zip wire sited at the opposite end of the village playing fields. An exciting event featuring Alice and the Mad Hatter from the Adventure Wonderland in Bournemouth was attended by over two hundred people to celebrate its opening.

The new £200,000 Portland Skate Park, built next door to the Masonic Car Park in Underhill, was also officially opened in November with around 150 young people turning up to demonstrate their skills to both the Mayor of Portland and the borough Mayor of Weymouth and Portland. The skate park project was funded as part of the South West

Regional Development Agency's (SWERDA) sale agreement on a piece of land known as Officers Field. SWERDA agreed with the developer that provision and management of £500,000 from future land sale receipts was to be invested in sports and leisure facilities within five hundred metres of the new housing development.

There had been a skate park already on the site but it had had to be removed as unsafe having virtually rusted away. A group was formed known as Portland Skate Park Users Group, who worked with young would-be skaters and the company Freestyle to design the new skate park. To date this has proved a very well-used facility.

Still on the subject of skate parks, according to the police, anti-social behaviour has dropped dramatically in Dorchester since the opening of the skate park. Official figures show reports of anti-social behaviour in north Dorchester fell by a third despite large numbers of Dorchester's young people congregating in the purpose built skate park. Dorchester Section Commander, Les Fry, said the reduction was a tremendous result for the town and showed the value of having such a good facility for young people, who were extremely good at policing the park themselves, looking after the younger and less experienced users.

In Sherborne the project to revamp the Skatepark continues with a Halloween themed fun day held in November for which a group of eleven young people and six adults repainted the skate ramps' surfaces and made a banner.

The Our Space 2 project, providing advice and support to groups wishing to develop play facilities, held its final Play Talking event at Milborne St Andrew in October. Equipment suppliers and experts in the play area gave talks on design, inspection and maintenance and equipment was temporarily installed in the adjoining field for all to view (and even try out). Sadly this project comes to an end in March.

Other news related to young people was clearly not so good as severe cuts are proposed to the youth service. It is not yet clear what exactly this will mean but it may mean the closure of some youth clubs and / or cuts in the provision in other areas. On the other hand an exciting £3m project to develop the Steps Club in Weymouth is to go ahead after all, after the Department for Education confirmed it would not be removing the funding. The project has specific aims around reducing youth unemployment, anti-social behaviour and teenage pregnancy, improving health, providing jobs and skills opportunities and enabling young people to make a positive contribution to their community.

Young people in Dorchester made a positive contribution to their community when the young people from the Youth Club set about restoring a pond as part of Making A Difference Day. Meanwhile young people in care who sit on the Children in Care Council formed the Dorset Kidz: Stand Up Speak Up Group and helped councillors draw up a pledge of promises – a written commitment from the council to do its best to ensure the happiness, welfare and future opportunities of the children in its care.

10. EMPLOYMENT

Of course the news here is dominated by the expectation of over five hundred job losses at the County Council, which will clearly have a particularly noticeable effect in Dorchester. Other job losses were announced in different parts of the county throughout the quarter: for example Lulworth Castle announced the closure of several attractions and events leading to the loss of around fifteen jobs whilst a solicitor's practice in Bridport closed on New Year's Eve with a loss of fifteen jobs. A leading engineering firm in Weymouth, Park Manufacturing Ltd, went into administration in October. Eighty-seven people were employed there and the administrators made

twenty-four of them redundant but are clearly attempting to find a buyer for the company and to keep the others employed. Twelve employees at MSI Defence Systems on the Granby Industrial Estate were told the firm was closing and another firm, Martech, announced it was making between eight and ten staff redundant. Much of the county's engineering and manufacturing capacity is geared towards defence and there are fears these will be badly hit by the government's strategic defence review.

There has been a worrying increase in long-term unemployment figures, that is to say people who have claimed job seekers' allowance for more than twelve months. All districts have seen a sharp rise from the lowest, Weymouth and Portland, which has increased from 45 to 115 people (156%), whilst in the highest, North Dorset the figures have gone up from 5 to 50 – a 900% increase! There have also been large rises in East Dorset from 15 to 80 (433%) and in West Dorset from 20 to 80 (300%).

Despite this trend, unemployment figures are still not too bad compared to other parts of the country. In fact latest regional figures suggest a rise in employment for males although there was a drop in female employment. Hopefully fuller details will be available later in the year.

The government has decided against moving military training from Blandford Camp to South Wales in 2015, which should be good news for the economy in that area. Blandford Camp is responsible for nearly 5000 jobs, nearly a third of the local economy. Communities in north Dorset have been particularly active in seeking to help the unemployed. A new job club was opened in Gillingham in November, run by volunteers to help with writing CVs, preparing for interviews, giving advice on benefits and training and so on. Running one Friday a month, it joins the Job Clubs already established in Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton. JobCentres are very difficult to access from this part of the county, following recent closures and these are fulfilling a much needed service.

There has been dismay at the decision to close the Dorset Business Link service, in particular as this will lead to the closure of six Rural Dorset Business Clubs. The chairmen of the clubs – North Dorset, Hardy (which meets at Poundbury), Marshwood, East Dorset, Abbey and Forum – have written to the Minister for Business and Enterprise to protest about the planned closures. They protest that the new business support arrangements are at best vague and uncertain whereas the Business Link service has a proven track record and high levels of customer satisfaction.

11. ARTS AND CULTURE

Arts and culture tend to be particularly vulnerable in times of austerity and this time is proving no exception. The library service in particular has been singled out for large scale cutbacks, including proposals to withdraw funding from twenty of our thirty-four libraries, thereby saving £578,300. The libraries earmarked for the withdrawal of funding are Beaminster, Burton Bradstock, Charmouth, Chickerell, Colehill, Corfe Castle, Corfe Mullen, Crossways, Littlemoor (in Weymouth), Lyme Regis, Lytchett Matravers, Portland Tophill, Portland Underhill, Puddletown, Stalbridge, Sturminster Newton, Upton, West Moors, Wool and Wyke Regis. There will be an invitation to the local communities to take ownership of the libraries and there will be more news on this in the next few months. However the savings must be in place by April 2012 at the latest. There are also proposals to cut the book fund and in short we are likely to see a much reduced service in the future.

In some areas of the county there are active Friends of the library associations and they are unhappy at the lack of consultation that has gone into these proposals. They are particularly concerned that once a library is closed permanently it will never re-open.

Yet the spending cuts are intended to only last until 2015. The friends of libraries groups have formed an action group to fight the prospect of so many libraries being lost. They point out, amongst other things, that many of the libraries being lost are in areas of rural isolation where communities are already suffering from the loss of their Post Offices and village shops or local pub.

However plans to replace the main library in Dorchester with a new one appear to be safe. The intention is to relocate the county library and the adult learning centre to the office block that forms part of the proposed Charles Street development.

On a more cheerful note the empty and nigh on derelict Lyric in Bridport has been bought by a dancer and puppeteer couple to become the home of the Stuff and Nonsense Theatre Company. Built in 1746 as a chapel the building had been a cinema, meeting hall, and school of dance before falling into disuse. (www.aloadofstuffandnonsense.co.uk). Clearly there will be a lot of work required and funds to be raised but this is a welcome first step.

Also in Bridport the first phase of renovations at the Arts Centre was unveiled in October consisting of a newly renovated forecourt paved to create more space. The annual literary festival proved a great success with over thirty author events and talks. (www.bridport-arts.com). Still in Bridport, which is fast becoming a real artistic hub in the county, children from the local primary schools completed a large scale mural showing the town from a child's eye view for display on the hoarding surrounding the town hall during its revamp.

Wimborne held its fourth food festival in October and this was a great success with numbers above 8000. Dorset Food Week was held for the tenth time during October half-term, and food was also a theme during "Screen bites" <http://www.screenbites.co.uk/>, a food film festival showing films with a food theme and showcasing local food at the same time.

On the film front Purbeck Film Festival had another successful year but the monthly Film Dock programme on Portland came to an end. The Purbeck Film Festival has now been running for fourteen years and has expanded the range of both films and venues over this time.

An innovative project that aims to bridge the divide between arts and science is being developed. Known as Exploratory Laboratory with the Jurassic Coast as its focus and running until 2012 the programme includes an exhibition, arts / earth science symposium, commissions and a learning programme. The exhibition of displays on how science is being used to measure and describe the Jurassic Coast alongside a series of works by artists inspired by science was put on display at both Bridport Arts Centre and Sturminster Newton's Exchange.