

**Ringwood Town Council Meeting 31st March 2010****– a Report from District Councillor Chris Treleaven**1) District Council Budgets – future income and expenditure

The need to cut public expenditure in future years nationally is now accepted by all political parties whoever wins the election. “Grants” from central Government to Local Authorities will be cut - i.e. we will get even less of our own money back. All Local Councils are evaluating how they can reduce expenditure to match reduced income. NFDC is no exception.

Increased efficiencies have contributed greatly in ensuring Council Taxpayers get value for their money, and this policy will continue. Additionally, are all the current services and subsidies provided actually needed, or there some which – though nice to have – wouldn't actually be missed?

2) A31 Traffic Management Measures – congestion and safety

Cllr Rippon-Swaine as County Councillor and myself as Portfolio Holder (not as a Ringwood Councillor) met recently with Officers and Highway Engineers from HCC, the Highways Agency (“HA”) and NFDC to hear of the latest plans to reduce congestion and improve safety on the westbound part of the A31 at Ringwood.

HA has funds to investigate adding a third continuous lane between the A338/B3347 flyover and the Verwood turn. Modelling studies indicate that if nothing is done, this section of the Highway will reach gridlock continually. A third lane will be designed to increase traffic speeds above the near stationary situation at peak times. This will mean the existing accesses to and from side entrances will feed a faster moving traffic stream than at present, and how to safely cope with this is being studied. Funds to implement the third lane are not secured as yet. Public consultation will follow in the near future..

The HA and Police continue to maintain that the evidence shows most accidents are caused by (drivers not coping with) congestion and hence are concentrating on solving this problem. Most local people and Councillors believe that the accidents are caused by speed.

The promised “congestion ahead” warning signs on the A31 approach to Ringwood should be installed this Spring.

Dorset Safety Partnership is willing to include the Ringwood part of the A31 in their studies of why the 50mph StLeonards speed limit is not being complied with. The “average speed” enforcement system – the only effective deterrent - cost millions, apparently.

3) Visitor Information Centre

The decision to close this at Easter was not – for the record – made by NFDC Cabinet. The building is not fit for purpose and considerable funds are needed just to meet Health and Safety standards for visitors and employees alike. How best for all Councils (County, District & Town) to provide cost effective across-the-counter services in Ringwood is still under study. The effect of the economic downturn is proving difficult to assess in terms of value-for-money for the taxpayer, bearing in mind we are looking to long term solutions.

We are reminded that the Visitor Centre has a district-wide purpose particularly for the western Forest area. If it is argued that it is only for Ringwood promotional work, the Town Council might like to take it over.

#### 4) Local Development Framework – ongoing work

Evaluation of suitable Sites for development continues for public consultation later this year. To meet the requirements of the accepted Core Strategy for housing and employment, many more sites have been suggested (including Ringwood) than are actually needed. The objective criteria for judging suitability are now being drawn up – how these are applied to each site will of course be made public to those who submitted suggestions.

Open Space and “Green Infrastructure” (e.g. footpaths) and even allotments (!) are being re-evaluated in terms of what realistically can be delivered in the next 15 years. Your Town Council will wish to comment on/alter/propose plans for this work in the coming months (much as for the recent Cycle Routes work).

“Local Distinctiveness” work – designed to ensure new development reinforces and enhances what local people perceive as the valuable local characteristics of their area is going well in New Milton and looks promising for Lymington. The next Town for this planning work will be Ringwood (early next year). In view of the very different attitudes your Town Council has to design and conservation issues compared with the other Towns, it will be interesting to see how local consultation contributes to this work.

#### 5) Ringwood Meeting House

The Trustees of the Meeting House have learnt that their bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a grant over £500,000 to renovate and enhance this unique building has been successful. The District Council has supported this bid throughout in many practical ways, motivated by the huge contribution Trustees continue to make to the cultural life of Ringwood. The new funds will be used to provide a state-of-the-art local History Centre, and the renovated building provide an even more pleasant and enjoyable setting for the community activities and performances available for visitors and residents.

(crt 29.03.10).