**To:** all members of Dorset County Council

**From:** the Bishop of Sherborne, the Rt Revd Dr Graham Kings

**Date:** Wednesday 16 February 2011

Tomorrow morning you will participate in a debate about how Dorset County Council should deploy the resources available to it in these times of economic constraint. It is a responsibility that I know you do not take lightly, and one which I do not envy you. The County Council clearly needs to agree a balanced budget that will enable it to serve the people of Dorset over the next year and indeed, set the tone for future budgets over the coming years. It is clear that the Council will not have available to it all of the resources and funding that might be desirable, so cuts and savings must be made. The question that remains is about how those cuts will fall; what values will inform the discussion in this difficult debate? What sort of Dorset do we want to see for the future? Who will benefit, and who will be the losers after tomorrow’s debate?

Having considered the budget cuts that are being proposed I have to say that I am still puzzled by how some of these suggestions have come to be tabled. It looks as if many of the proposals will fall particularly heavily on some of the poorest and most vulnerable people who live in this county. Access to services for disabled people is threatened, as are payments to foster carers, support for young people who are at the stage of life where decisions about their futures and possible careers must be made, reductions in the numbers of day centres for older people, the Waves project in Weymouth; all of these are highly valued by people who will experience a deep cut in quality of life at the very least. In the overall budget of the County Council these cuts may make a bit of a difference but I am not alone in thinking that it must have been possible for the Council’s officers to identify other savings that would have less impact on so many vulnerable people.

You will know that the proposed cut to the Waves project in Weymouth has generated a lot of anxiety. My colleague, Sir Al Aynsley Green, the former Childrens’ Commissioner for England, visited the project last week and concluded that it is an amazing project by any standards: “An outstanding drop-in centre for troubled youngsters, an outreach parenting programme and a service for family mediation have quietly helped, through expert counselling and therapy, many hundreds of local people to overcome their difficulties.” You should know that there is a lot of concern among those who work with young people about how this particular project came to be targeted for a cut. The Council’s own Youth Service, as well as health workers and other statutory services have referred young people and their families to Waves. Some of these young people have been on the point of suicide, have experienced rejection or extremes of bullying, and having been referred to Waves can testify today about how the project turned their lives around, or even saved their lives. I ask you to consider very carefully why it is that a project that has achieved so much for families and young people in desperate circumstances should find itself so high on the list of budget cuts.

Indeed as we give careful thought to Council budgets and priorities, I feel that there must still be room for consideration of what new services the Council should be supporting. Time moves on, society changes, and the needs of the poorest people and of the most vulnerable people also change. New ways of responding to those needs are identified and the services that councils, health professionals, charities, and indeed, churches, must also change if they are to respond to real evidenced need.

One example of what I am thinking about here is the Nightstop project. This project provides short-term accommodation for young people in crisis by placing them with trained and vetted host families around the county. The project was started in 2009 and had financial support from most of our District Councils as well as a significant grant from Government. This project provides councils, at County and District levels, with very large savings compared to the traditional ways of looking after young people who find themselves homeless and possibly facing nights sleeping out on our streets. In Dorset the project has been run by Action for Children at a low cost for administration, risk assessment, volunteer recruitment and training, and transport for young people. It is an exemplar of what can be achieved when statutory bodies and the voluntary sector work together, and yet at the moment it is only funded until the end of June. Is it really the case that there are no savings that could be made within the County Council to free up funds for projects like Nightstop and other new ways of meeting the needs of people in our county?

Dorset is a wonderful county. I have only had the privilege of living here for just over a year and a half, but I have experienced the warmth and generosity of the vibrant community life that is very much a positive characteristic of life in this county. I know that people in this county are genuinely concerned for the needs of young people, of older people, and of the most vulnerable families and people who don’t have the resources that many of us take for granted. It is my hope that you will find ways of engaging in tomorrow’s difficult debate so that the needs of those who are in greatest need in our County can be prioritised.

Rest assured that my colleagues and I will be praying for you in your decision-making as well as for the discussions that will, no doubt, continue into the weeks ahead.

“As you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”. Matthew chapter 25

Yours faithfully

The Rt Revd Dr Graham Kings

Bishop of Sherborne