

Questions from Councillors

Question from Cllr Nick Ireland

At a previous Cabinet meeting I spoke with the Adult Services Executive Director concerning the funding provided by and relationship with Dorset Council to an adult constituent of mine (X) with special needs.

He kindly engaged the relevant manager and I met with him and a finance / assessment officer very soon afterwards to explain the detail and was subsequently provided with several responses.

Without going into specifics, the issue breaks down into two items, one of which I wish to raise.

X had to move from Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

The amount X receives from central government is still the same enhanced payment amount and X's needs have not changed. However, Dorset Council have reduced X's income by not permitting a proportion of X's payment for night care to be disappplied from the financial assessment when this was previously done.

Th effect of this is to reduce X's income by £125/month. X has no other income (and never will) and is entirely dependent on benefits and parental support.

The Disability Rights Association highlight that moving from DLA to PIP SHOULD NOT be an excuse for local authorities to disadvantage their dependants when their needs have not changed and that the disapplication should be continued.

The responses I have received from Dorset Council are that the current policy is based on guidance in the Care Act and also from the National Association of Financial Assessment Officers (NAFAO). However, they also acknowledge that some local authorities are continuing with the practise of disapplying a proportion of PIP income for assessment purposes.

Whilst I am well aware of the current funding crisis facing this council, and in particular those services we provide to Adults and Children, it seems both absurd and completely inequitable that a Dorset resident with extensive care needs is penalised by an arbitrary change that this council has the discretion to ignore, yet has failed to do so. X's needs have not altered and if they do, they certainly won't improve.

Will the cabinet member please provide a rationale for continuing this unfair state of affairs or announce an immediate change in this council's approach to supporting X and our other residents with extensive care needs?

Response from the leader of the Council on behalf of the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health

In the absence of the portfolio holder, officers would be happy to meet with Cllr Ireland to discuss the specific concerns in this individual case, in order to ensure the financial assessment has appropriately reflected the full needs of his individual constituent.

In addition officer have agreed to review Dorset's approach to its policy with neighbouring authorities in the south west and will provide an update before the next Cabinet meeting.

Question from Cllr Maria Roe

Low Carbon Dorset, the three year programme funded by the European Regional fund will end in December 2020 and all projects must be completed by June 2020.

The programme has been extremely successful and has helped local businesses, the public sector and community organisations to realise projects which otherwise may not have come to fruition.

The project has included giving free technical advice, workshops, networking events, and low carbon grants.

Will the Council be able to continue any elements of the programme next year?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment

Indeed, the Low Carbon Dorset programme has been very successful and has presented an opportunity for the Dorset Council Sustainability Team to provide technical advice, and also financial support to businesses and communities to deliver low carbon projects. The team have recently submitted a bid that if successful will extend the programme for another 2 years and allow the support of many more projects. As you are aware Dorset Council are investing in additional staff for this team to support our Climate Change Emergency work, and we would envisage that even if the recent funding bid is unsuccessful the team will have capacity to continue providing advice, networking opportunities and workshops to local businesses and community organisations.

Question from Cllr Nick Ireland

Agenda item 7 (Q2 Budget Report) as a recommendation asks that Cabinet "note the impact that any overspend will have on reserves and the general fund" yet the outcome isn't explicitly stated.

"What was the reserve level when Dorset Council was formed on the 1st April 2019, how much of that reserve has already been committed to this year's budget, how much more reserves are expected to be used to address the ongoing challenges in balancing the budget and what is the final reserve level expected to be once this financial year has been closed down?"

Response from the portfolio Holder for Finance, Commercial and Assets

There are two types of reserve available to the Council; the *general fund* and *earmarked, usable reserves*.

At 1 April 2019, the value of the general fund was approximately £28m - the exact amount will be confirmed after the disaggregation of the former County Council to Dorset Council and BCP Council is complete (this is close). Any overspend on the current year's revenue budget would come from the general fund unless other reserves were used instead. So, for example, an overspend of £8m would reduce the balance on the general fund to £20m. In agreeing the budget for 2019/20, Shadow Council agreed to set the minimum balance for the general fund at £14.5m – ie it must not fall below that level.

Other reserves available to the council are still under review as part of the MTFP planning process. One of the many benefits flowing to the converged Council is that it can provide *once* for a single risk, through reserves rather than having six separate reserves (and policies) for the same risk. This means it will be possible to release money from reserves as part of the 2020/21 budget and MTFP process though at this stage we cannot say exactly how much that is. However, reserves can only be spent once and their application as part of a financial planning process is not a sustainable approach to balancing a budget.

The 2019/20 budget was balanced without the use of the general fund or earmarked reserves so any overspend in-year will be the only requirement to draw on these funds.