

COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS FOR CABINET – 28 JANUARY 2020

1. Question from Cllr Nick Ireland

Prince Andrew House, Hardy Complex, Castletown, Portland

Planning permission was originally granted for the site back in 2004 and yet the 'Ocean Views' development has yet to be completed.

Work has been halted for the best part of ten years and the skeleton of Prince Andrew House has blighted the Underhill conservation area, whilst then additional housing adjacent has also yet to be built.

The building is an eyesore for residents and visitors alike, whilst the lack of security presents a risk to our children.

Portland needs investment and whilst the efforts of Portland Port and Agincare in using their resources to improve Castletown is to be commended, the blot on the landscape remains. Portland is desperately short of genuine, affordable housing and investment in the locality would make a massive difference to our residents.

Options available to Dorset Council include, but are not limited to, compulsory purchase or issuing an S215 notice.

Can the portfolio holder please report as to what action is being taken now and our strategy following on from that?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Housing

Prince Andrew House, Hardy Complex, Castletown, Portland

The Ocean Views development site was subject to an application by Weymouth & Portland Borough Council for £2.838m of Housing Infrastructure Funding (HIF) in September 2017. The purpose of the application was to seek funding to support the delivery of important land stabilisation works which would help facilitate the delivery of approximately 191 new build units forming phase three of the Ocean Views scheme.

In March 2019, Homes England confirmed that Weymouth & Portland Borough Council were successful in their application and would be awarded the funding as a grant subject to the completion of a funding agreement. Unfortunately, officers were unable to secure commitment from the developer Comer Homes Group to complete the funding agreement under the terms offered.

Throughout the HIF application process, Comer Homes Group has advised that phase two (Prince Andrew House) could be delivered without the assistance of external funding. Indeed, the Local Planning Authority approved changes to the design and appearance of Prince Andrew House in March 2018 to help reduce the cost of the scheme and facilitate the delivery of this key building. In May 2019, Comer advised that the delay in starting work on Phase two had been a result of a number of issues including uncertainty over the current housing market, the availability of labour and materials from Europe and changes in Building Regulations relating to cladding. On the back of this, Building Control Officers proactively engaged with Comer Group and provided advice with a view to opening up a more formal conversation.

In the period since, officers have undertaken a number of ward walks with local councillors and have also met with a number of business representatives in Portland. These have highlight significant concerns on the part of local residents about the impact of the site is having on the amenity of the area. More recently, the poor condition of the site is being addressed by the Planning Enforcement Team. A first warning letter was issued to Comer Homes Group on the 14th November requesting that works be carried out to remove rubbish and building materials within 28 days. The warning explained that failure to deal with the site satisfactorily could lead to enforcement action being taken under Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Since issuing the first warning, Comer Homes Group have responded to inform Dorset Council that works had started prior to the issue of the warning letter to clear the area of building materials and rubbish. In addition, Comer have advised that works have also started to repair and improve the fencing, hoardings and gates to the compound and site. Enforcement officers will carry out a further site visit after the 28 day period has ended to inspect the condition of the site.

Officers from across the Place Directorate remain committed to working with Comer Homes to bring forward a scheme for the site. In parallel to the ongoing enforcement action, a meeting has been requested with representatives of Comer Group to pick up progress with phase two and consider future options for the site.

A further letter went out to Comer homes on the 30 December 2019 as a site inspection was carried out and no improvements had been made. The letter gave a further 28 days to improve the appearance of the site.

A further site visit was carried out on Thursday 16 December and Comer homes had undertaken a small amount of clearance however the appearance of the site had not improved at all.

On Friday 17 January an email was sent to Comer homes informing them the Section 215 Notice was being drafted and would be served on them within the next couple of weeks.

Notice should be served on 14 February 2020.

2. Question from Cllr Brian Heatley

To ask the Cabinet member for Highways, Travel and Environment to report on the progress made on energy procurement since the decisions of Cabinet on 5 November 2019 (Item 78 in the minutes of that meeting), and in particular the identification of 'a range of actions to be taken that would reduce Dorset Council's carbon emissions.'

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment

Response

The Council is currently within what is a pre-procurement stage of the process of the energy procurement exercise. We can advise however, that since the key decision around Energy Procurement was made by Cabinet on 5 November 2019, the following pre-procurement activities have been undertaken:

- Consultation with schools and other public sector partner organisations to facilitate sign up to Dorset Council Energy contracts and service development
- Delivery cost modelling in line with uptake and further service development
- Development of Terms and Conditions for partner organisations, reflecting new LASER contract documents and new service requirements
- Updating of service and associated documents, FAQs, etc on Dorset NEXUS (buying platform for schools and other partner organisations)
- Negotiating key terms, Service Level Agreements and KPIs for new contract documents with LASER and suppliers
- Data cleansing and query resolution across portfolio in readiness for new contract period, including scrutiny of ex sovereign Councils supplies
- Supply verification for next contract period
- Collation of further supply specific information required for schedules in Call off Agreements and Access Agreements

The aim is to sign up partner organisations by the end of February and, in terms of the actual procurement, complete the Call-Off from Laser and sign the Access Agreements by the end of March.

As stated in the Energy Procurement Cabinet report the LASER framework provides significant flexibility to take action to reduce the Council's carbon emissions in line with any recommendations from the Climate Change Executive Advisory Panel (CCEAP). Once the procurement has been completed and the contractual arrangements have been finalised, it is our intention to work collaboratively with LASER, suppliers and partners to further explore options for low carbon energy supply, for example through entering sleeving arrangements and Power Purchase Agreements with specific renewable energy installations.