

Councillor's questions

From Cllr David Gray

1. On housing of the homeless or those needing housing in an emergency , given the 48hr notice we were given were the correct processes followed and the members it affected consulted before action was taken?

Response

In replying to this question it is important to provide the wider context regarding the housing of rough sleepers and homeless households during the Covid-19 pandemic, as this response will be seen by members of the public who may not be aware of the situation. As Cllr Gray states on the 26th March Dorset Council along with all other local authorities in England were e-mailed by Dame Louise Casey with the heading "Everyone In" asking housing teams to focus on getting every rough sleeper an offer of somewhere they can stay safely by the weekend of the 29th March. At the same time the government was advising people to stay at home, and told providers of holiday accommodation that they must close. The guidance was later revised in the same week allowing exceptions for B&B's, hotels and caravan parks to remain open if they were accommodating key workers or homeless persons. However, by this point many smaller guest houses and hotels had closed and furloughed their staff. The Council approached many businesses in Dorset asking for their support in accommodating rough sleepers as well as an increasing number of homeless persons who in the main were in shared accommodation and were being asked to leave their accommodation for a number reasons. Only a small number of hotels were prepared to support the Council in providing accommodation in a very short timescale.

In addition on 26 March 2020 Luke Hall MP, Minister for Local Government and Homelessness wrote to local leaders thanking us for the continuing work in response to the COVID-19 crisis. He emphasised the unprecedented scale of the challenge we all faced and our joint responsibility to safeguard as many homeless people as we can from COVID-19. He wrote that our strategy must be to bring in those on the streets to protect their health and stop wider transmission of Covid-19.

Given the tight time scales, the challenges being faced in securing accommodation and the emergency nature of situation groups of officers were desperately working and calling businesses to obtain accommodation. Given the unique situation the Council found itself in and the unprecedented nature of what was being undertaken, there was no 'official process' to follow. The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety was briefed of the work taking place, there simply was not enough time to given the emergency nature of the situation

2. On the measures to improve pedestrianisation in the Harbour area due to social distancing pressures, did the council consult with all Dorset (Weymouth Councillors) and the residents it affected in a timely way before implementation. In particular was the communication plan of the proposed changes signed agreed beforehand.

Response

Discussions were held with the Weymouth (Dorset Council) councillors who hold seats in the wards in which the harbourside vehicle restriction scheme is located.

A meeting was held at the end of June with Cllrs Jon Orell, Brian Heatley, Claire Sutton, Kate Wheller, Ryan Hope, Gill Taylor, Highways Portfolio Holder Ray Bryan and the vice-chair of the Harbour Group Sarah Williams at which officers outlined the proposal and sought feedback. Adjustments were made to the scheme as a result of this.

Part of the comms strategy and public consultation was to ask people their views via Commonplace – an online consultation platform.

<https://dorsetsafeststreetsmap.commonplace.is/> Dorset Council launched this on the 4th June to obtain public views on places where we needed to make the situation safer for cyclists and pedestrians. This method of seeking resident's and business' views was heavily publicised on the Dorset Council website, social media and newsletters – see here: <https://news.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/2020/06/04/pop-up-walking-and-cycling-routes-coming-to-dorset/>

In the following three weeks over 2,700 comments were received through this platform about proposals across Dorset. These comments were being analysed regularly to understand Dorset residents' concerns and to inform discussion with Members. The website allows users either to register their own comments, or support comments already made. Many of the comments received related to the desire to restrict traffic to the harbourside roads in Weymouth. After aggregating all the various comments with different points, we summarised that of the 105 comments relating to the harbourside area, 10 were against and 95 were in favour. This was despite many of the concerned businesses/residents already being aware of the potential scheme and several raising it specifically in their comments.

While this does not represent a dedicated, formal public consultation on the exact details of the scheme - that was impossible within the very tight timescales given to us by government to enable the easing of lockdown safely. The exact details of the schemes were refined using feedback and input from further face to face meetings with residents, businesses and councillors throughout the initial phase of the scheme.

The legal method used to implement the harbourside restrictions was to apply an emergency temporary traffic management notice. As the grounds for this were to improve public safety, it did not legally require any prior consultation. However, we thought it prudent to carry out the described level of consultation as an additional measure. We have benchmarked ourselves with other authorities in the south west as part of the South West Highways Alliance. The feedback we received was that similar authorities were using the same legislation in order to meet central government's time scale for schemes of this nature.

The harbourside restrictions were communicated to residents and businesses in a number of ways. We issued a press release on 30 June which was picked up by several local media outlets including Dorset Echo, Wessex FM and BBC Radio Solent. We also shared details on our social media channels and website and included the story in our e-news to residents, businesses and councillors (40k recipients). The legal documentation for the restriction was shown on our interactive roadworks map which is accessible by the public and also used by sat nav companies for route planning. In addition, we also amended our road side electronic variable message signs to inform people travelling towards the area.

Our Community Highway Officers walked the harbourside during the week before the restrictions came into place and spoke with local businesses, residents and boat owners to explain the plans. This specifically included discussions with a large group of local residents and business owners by the harbourside on 1 July.

From Cllr Peter Barrow

The Government gave Dorset Council 48 hours notice to get our homeless residents into accommodation, being as Dorset Council has no in house hostel type accommodation there was no choice but to rely on the private sector for housing and this was only forthcoming from three hotels in Weymouth. This meant all our homeless residents were housed in Weymouth with many being moved away from their home locations and consequently away from existing support networks.

What changes in policy and procedures does Dorset Council intend to make to ensure it has a wider range of choices available to house homeless residents in future, so that we do not have a situation where all our homeless residents are housed in one location with many being moved away from home locations and existing support networks?

Response

As outlined above in response to Cllr Gray's question officers were working under extremely challenging circumstances never seen before and had limited options available to them in terms of accommodation. The Council works where ever possible to provide accommodation near to support networks but this isn't always possible. Those without a local connection to Dorset are provided with support to return to their local area. In terms of looking forward officers have now completed needs assessments of those currently accommodated and have an understanding of the type of accommodation needed for the those homeless households currently being supported. This also includes preferred locations which are not all in Weymouth but across the County taking into account support networks. However, the majority of those supported by the Council have a connection to the Weymouth and Portland area. All of this work along with other information is being pulled together to create a Dorset accommodation strategy to determine what accommodation the Council needs (for example supported housing, hostels etc.) now and in the future. The Council has also submitted a bid to MHCLG as part of the Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NSAP) which is the Government funding announced of £161m that would be made available in 2020/21 for 3,300 homes for rough sleepers in the next 12 months. There was a further announcement, on 24 June, that a fund of £105m to enable local authorities to best support the nearly 15,000 people placed into emergency accommodation during the Covid-19 pandemic would be available. The council is currently in the process of completing a bid for some of this funding to purchase a site and convert into a hostel for homeless households as well as purchase 1 bedroom properties. However, this grant funding is not 100% and there will be an expectation that the Council must use some of its own capital to contribute to projects. This will be the subject of a cabinet report in September, which is when we will know if we have been successful in our bid.

From Cllr Gill Taylor

I appreciate that hindsight is wonderful but would like to ask a question about the timeline for housing homeless people in Dorset in anticipation that improvements can be considered when the planning for future scenarios where homeless people need to, or are likely to need, bringing in. I would also ask a question about the actions required in the letter to councils on 26th March, two days before lock down.

- 1) The WHO declared a global pandemic for covid on 11 March 2020, countries across Europe were locking down and there were strong indications that the UK would soon follow. Could you please:
- Confirm that the need to house homeless people was included in Dorset Council's emergency plans to manage a pandemic?

Response

While a number of business continuity plans had been prepared by the housing service to enable the service to be delivered in the event of staff being impacted by a pandemic flu outbreak, the planning did not cover the scenario of increased homelessness, this will now be looked at as part of the wider lessons learned. However, plans also cover the emergency housing of households in rest centres if an evacuation was required for example flooding and fire and discussions took place with emergency planning colleagues what strategies to put in place should this scenario happen as social distancing in rest centres would have been challenging.

- Outline the actions were taken between 11th March and 26th March when the instruction came from MHCLG to take all homeless people in? This is particularly important as this would have been at the time when the NHS were putting their emergency plans into action and block booking hotels for their staff.

Response

The table below outlines some of the key dates in relation to the outbreak in respect of housing.

Date	Event
13 March 2020	The Lantern Trust contact Dorset Council to advise that a member of the team that is supporting the Safe Sleep project is unwell and the Church of England who's premises are used to provide sleeping accommodation for Safe Sleep are unable to continue to support the project. 16 individuals are supported by the project. It was anticipated that most could be supported into longer term accommodation at the end of the project in early April. The Council agrees to pay for the accommodation of a number of individuals supported by the project for an initial period of 4 weeks. Accommodation is found for 8 at a private B&B Sanderson House while the remaining 8 stay at Safe Sleep practising social distancing.
17 March 2020	The Communities Secretary announces £3.2 million of emergency funding to help rough sleepers to self-isolate. This initial emergency response funding will ensure swift support is offered to people who are unable to self-isolate, such as those staying in night shelters or assessment hubs, as well as people who are currently sleeping rough. Dorset is allocated £13.5K https://www.gov.uk/government/news/3-2-million-emergency-support-for-rough-sleepers-during-coronavirus-outbreak
23 March 2020	Government instruction for all residents to stay inside apart from key workers and essential needs. Residents should only go outside to buy food, to exercise once a day, or to go to work if they absolutely cannot work from home.
23 March 2020	Telephone call at 3pm with MHCLG called Dorset/MHCLG Covid-19 catch up. Team were advised that the government would be issuing a formal letter

	<p>advising local authorities that rough sleepers needed to be accommodated by the weekend and work should begin to identify who needed to be accommodated and where.</p>
24 March 2020	<p>Letter from the Minister for Local Government and Homelessness, Luke Hall, to hotel chief executives regarding the exemption for hotels, hostels and B&Bs to open so as to offer accommodation to support key workers and vulnerable people.</p> <p>https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-hotel-accommodation-to-support-key-workers-and-vulnerable-people</p> <p>Accommodation cell convened to secure accommodation. However, many hotels have already closed and furloughed staff and not prepared to re-open. Others were block booked by the NHS and were not willing to take additional block bookings from the council. Several businesses told officers that they did not want to accommodate homeless households.</p>
26 March 2020	<p>E-mail from Dame Louise Casey to housing managers with the heading “Everyone In” asking housing teams to focus on getting everyone an offer of somewhere they can stay safely and, if need be, self-isolate by the weekend.</p>
26 March 2020	<p>Letter from Luke Hall, Minister for Local Government and Homelessness, to all local authorities in England to update them on plans to protect rough sleepers during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide accommodation by 29 March.</p> <p>https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-minister-hall-to-local-authorities</p> <p>Guidance to Councils issued with the letter regarding the principles of finding accommodation was then withdrawn and to date (21 April) had not been re-issued.</p>
27 March 2020	<p>24 individuals were identified as sleeping rough by the Tuesday and were accommodated by Friday 27 March. A further 7 refused the offer and wished to remain sleeping rough. In addition 8 guests from the Bus Shelter project are moved from their sleeping accommodation to the Riviera Hotel, and those supported by the Safe Sleep project are found accommodation by the Lantern Trust in a B&B.</p>
28 March 2020	<p>Guidance issued to landlords and tenants to understand the implications of the Coronavirus Act 2020. The Act will mean that, until 30th September 2020, most landlords will not be able to start possession proceedings unless they have given their tenants three-months’ notice.</p> <p>https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-and-renting-guidance-for-landlords-tenants-and-local-authorities</p>
29 March 2020	<p>Deadline to provide accommodation to those accepted met by Dorset Council. Media report Councils given 48 hours to provide accommodation.</p> <p>https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/government-tells-councils-to-house-all-rough-sleepers-by-the-weekend-65853</p>

29 March 2020	Those presenting to the Council but not in priority need are provided with temporary accommodation as they are unable to secure accommodation in the private rented sector, due to the closure of estate agents. RP's advise that they will advertise some voids on Homechoice but will not be able to let any properties as maintenance staff are furloughed.
7 April 2020	First of the weekly Homelessness partnership meetings held with attendees from Dorset Council Housing, Police, Probation, REACH drug and alcohol, Public Health, Julian House, Lantern Trust, Bus Shelter all in attendance. Purpose of the meeting is to discuss and resolve concerns about the placement of rough sleepers in Weymouth.
8 April 2020	LGA and MHCLG advise the Council can access a government approved framework supplier, to help those in local government secure the exclusive use of hotels and other venues for block bookings. Company tasked to provide support in securing accommodating but are unable to find anything in Dorset advising that 'everywhere is closed or has been blocked booked by other agencies'. Dorset property cell continue to work in trying to finding other types of accommodation for use.
27 April 2020	Guidance issued to registered providers making it clear that essential moves should continue over this period, where it can be done in line with social distancing guidance. Most Dorset RP's however advise their staff are furloughed and they will only be advertising voids in exception circumstances https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-guidance-for-social-landlords-on-essential-moves?utm_source=d2b61f1f-657e-4d47-827c-c3221f2000d5&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate
13 May 2020	Following the Prime Ministers announcement easing some restrictions guidance is issued about moving home and the re-opening of the housing market for selling and renting. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/government-advice-on-home-moving-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak
18 May 2020	Decision made to return to business as usual for those presenting to the Council as homeless and only accommodate those in priority need. However as RP's have staff furloughed it takes time to get staff back to work and prepare properties for letting.

- Confirm that the numbers of homeless people approaching the council for support were in line with the numbers expected and if not what future work is being proposed to address this. This is particularly important with the potential for a second wave winter 20/21

At the height of the restrictions the council had 156 households in B&B accommodation of which 147 were single people. This has decreased as restrictions were lifted but the number in B&B accommodation remains high and as of 3rd August 2020 there were 132 households in B&B. Despite efforts to move people into other temporary accommodation there are still households presenting as homeless that the Council has a legal duty to support, during the 2 week period 17th to 28th July 2020 a further 25 people needed temporary accommodation. Before the Covid-19 pandemic Dorset Council had a disproportionately high amount of

households accommodated in B&B due to the lack of suitable temporary accommodation. For the 6 month period (Aug 19 – Jan 20) the average number of households in B&B accommodation was 75, and, on average 42 households exceeded a 6 week stay. MHCLG have advised the Council that Dorset Council is in the list of 20 local authorities outside of London with the highest numbers of placements under the coronavirus response. The scale of the increase was not anticipated, however as part of the work to develop an accommodation strategy and looking forward planning is taking place around the numbers of 10 new approaches per week. As outlined above a bid has been submitted to MHCLG to obtain capital funding to purchase and create additional temporary accommodation spaces but this is dependent on the Council contributing capital funding to the projects.

- 2) the Local Government Association The letter from Luke Hall MP to Council Leaders on 26th March instructing councils to bring people in off the streets included a programme of actions. Action 6 stated: *If possible, separating people who have significant drug and alcohol needs from those who do not.* What measures were put in place to comply with this and was this action reviewed during the time homeless people were being housed by us in response to the issues experienced in Weymouth sea front.

Response

The full text of the letter from Luke Hall MP stated the following programme of actions:

1. *Convening a local coordination cell to plan and manage your response to COVID and rough sleeping involving the local authority (housing, social care and public health) and local NHS partners together. This would then report in to wider local COVID structures.*
2. *Seeking to stop homeless people from congregating in facilities such as day centres and street encampments where there is a higher risk of transmission*
3. *Urgently procuring accommodation for people on the streets if you have not already done so – MHCLG will support you to do so if you are struggling to procure sufficient units.*
4. *Triaging people where possible into three cohorts driven by medical advice:*
 - *those with symptoms of COVID19;*
 - *those with pre-existing conditions but without symptoms; and*
 - *those without any of the above.*

Getting the social care basics such as food, and clinician care to people who need it in the self-contained accommodation. It is likely that you will need to utilise your commissioned homeless services to provide support to people in this accommodation and we urge you to work with the commissioned and non-commissioned sector to make sure there are adequate levels of support provided.

5. *If possible, separating people who have significant drug and alcohol needs from those who do not.*

Due to the tight timeframe all placements were made in a similar way to when the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) when rough sleepers are offered accommodation after 3 days of extreme weather, normally snow, but working in partnership with property colleagues in the property cell to block book accommodation where possible, taking into account the challenges outlines above. The guidance issued by MHCLG for placing rough sleepers was taken down within

hours of being issued with a statement on the government website that more guidance was expected in the coming days. This was never re-issued.

The Council was responding to an emergency situation and trying to secure accommodation as quickly as possible. All those placed had an accommodation needs assessment undertaken that asks a series of questions about the individual and their needs to help determine the most suitable placement under the circumstances. Meetings took place with partners such as the Police, homelessness support charities, probation services, and REACH drug and alcohol within 2 weeks to respond to concerns raised about few of those placed causing ASB, and how to best support people. All the rough sleepers had a support worker allocated to them as well as a mobile phone issued to them so they could call for support if needed. It is acknowledged in the early days of the lockdown restrictions where guidance was extremely strict about contact it was not possible to provide daily face to face contact but support was given via the telephone. Some health staff were considered to be key workers but in order to meet their own health and safety guidelines and protect their own workforce the number of face to face contact meetings in the early days was limited. Not all those supporting the rough sleepers were considered to be key workers. As guidance became clearer it was possible to increase the level of face to face support at the B&B's from a wide variety of support agencies. There is now daily support in the some of the B&B's offered to everyone accommodated not just the rough sleepers. Many Council's across the country have experienced very similar issues in securing support. There is a dependence on third parties to provide the right support who also had a duty to protect their staff.

From Cllr Jon Orrell

1. The recent move to incorporate local public health teams more firmly in the track and trace effort is warmly welcomed. One notes the success of such "boots on the ground" door knocking tactics in Leicester and Blackburn outbreaks. Will our public health team be properly and fully funded by central government as they embark on this vital role?

Response

The Government has announced that NHS Test and Trace will be formally merged with PHE to create a new national health protection institute. There are no plans to formally merge local teams with Test and Trace. But we work closely with the regional health protection team to ensure that we can collectively follow up cases and contacts. If we entered an acute outbreak phase where an on the ground presence was required in communities, we can use the Test and Trace Grant to support increasing local capacity to follow up and support cases and contacts. But the primary responsibility lies with regional health protection teams and will continue to do so.

2. What will be the trigger point for local teams to mobilise? The success of New Zealand "go in early, go in hard" tactics. Also other nations like Scotland or Taiwan aim for eradication rather than control. This is akin to extinguishing a fire rather than letting it smoulder. Might we use our local teams aggressively and actively to aim for 100% impact on each and every case.

Response

See previous answer. Evidence from SAGE shows that as long as 85% of cases and contacts are reached and self-isolate successfully then enough transmission is broken to prevent outbreaks from worsening. Eradication is difficult to achieve when we are now actively importing cases from elsewhere, e.g. from foreign travel, and internal travel within England

3. Can we use our local flexibility for some testing of asymptomatic individuals on a rolling basis?

Response

Asymptomatic testing is carried out already in our care homes. We would need a clear public health rationale for expanding testing to other groups, because with low numbers of cases, the likelihood of false positives becomes much more of an issue. Current public health advice is to focus testing on people with symptoms, and in situations where there is known to have been transmission, e.g. outbreaks.

4. Do our care homes and also care agencies supporting people in their own homes have sufficient PPE?

Response

Work is continuing through the PPE cell to ensure that this is the case.

5. Social services work in a close relationship to the NHS around discharges. Have our NHS colleagues and CCG clinical services review noted that cutting beds, doctors and nurses to very low numbers by international comparison leaves no slack in the system for epidemics? The NHS was not overwhelmed, however this was achieved by a) discharging patients to care homes causing substantial spread to shielded patients b) stopping routine care which also impacted on cancer treatments. A responsive system needs some slack in the good times to deal with demand in the bad times. Thus "care closer to home" with hospitals having high bed occupancy rates might seem efficient, but it is not resilient.

Response

This is a comment, and I can't speak directly for NHS colleagues, but I'm sure everyone concerned with planning and providing NHS services is aware of the difficulty of recovering the health services position caused by the pandemic, and the need to work in different ways to continue to accommodate its legacy, not only in terms of beds, but also workforce in the system to continue to provide essential procedures. There is a lot of work currently going on to implement a home first model of care locally that should help with overall system resilience in future.