

Full Council
10 December 2020
Councillor Questions and Responses

Question 1
Submitted by Cllr Paul Kimber

The empty shell of the building known as the Hardy Block Castletown, Portland, been an eyesore and a danger to the Portland community without being resolved for years. From the photograph submitted young people climbing on the building is clearly a massive danger to them and the community.

Given the dangers regarding this building what stronger action does the council intend to take in respect of completely clearing the site or the consideration of a compulsory purchase?

Response by Cllr David Walsh

Thank you for your question. I share your frustrations in wanting to see a solution to this long-standing situation.

Prince Andrew House is part of the former naval base which has the benefit of an extant planning permission for 554 residential units, involving a mix of new-build and conversion. The approved plans would see the conversion of the 'Hardy Block' into 157 units. However, this is a difficult and expensive site to develop and viability has proved to be a key stumbling block, in spite of a previous award of money through the Government's Housing Infrastructure Fund. Unfortunately this was still not sufficient to make the scheme viable and so the money could not be drawn down. In the absence of a substantial capital injection, completion of the scheme is therefore likely require a significant change in market conditions.

On the issue of safety, the building itself is structurally sound and not a dangerous structure under the provisions of the Building Act. The Council's Environmental Protection Officers have previously investigated reports of people accessing the site and at the time were satisfied that the company had secured the site as far as reasonably practicable and introduced appropriate monitoring procedures. This will be monitored but it is relevant to note that unauthorised access to private land is a responsibility for the owner and potentially a police matter.

Turning to the question of compulsory purchase, this requires ministerial approval and acquiring authorities should only use such powers where there is a compelling case in the public interest, and must demonstrate that they have taken reasonable steps to acquire all of the land and rights included in the Order by agreement. A number of steps are therefore required. In any event Dorset Council would need to be prepared to shoulder the financial cost (and subsequent risk) in taking such action, including any potential compensation liabilities under the provisions of the Compulsory Purchase Act. I would advise Council that now is not the appropriate time to be taking on such risks and the balance of public interest currently would not lie with embarking upon the acquisition via CPO of this site.

Question 2
Submitted by Cllr Bill Trite

Of all planning applications upon which a decision has been made by Dorset Council since the Council's inception, what percentage were determined under delegated powers without passing through a convened planning committee meeting, and what percentage were determined through the total number of convened meetings of the Council's planning committees?

Response by Cllr David Walsh

98% of planning decisions issued since 1 April 2019 have been determined under delegated powers, and 2% have been determined by the Council's planning committees.

Number of decisions are included in the table below:

| Dorset Council | | | |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| | Delegated | Committee | Total |
| Apps | 6837 | 140 | 6977 |
| % | 98 | 2 | |

Question 3
Submitted by Cllr Kelvin Clayton

Last week the PM vowed to cut CO₂ emissions by 68% by 2030 based on 1990 levels. In response, one of the UK's leading climate scientists, Prof. Sir Brian Hoskins, told the BBC that the PM's target "is ambitious", but added that "we need action to back it up, right now"! Bearing in mind the need for urgent action, what will be the process, method and timetable for reviewing responses to the consultation and finalising our CEE Strategy and Action Plan?

Response by Cllr Ray Bryan

Targeted promotion of the consultation opportunity is being undertaken by the Communications Team to ensure the maximum number of responses.

Statistical analysis of the responses is provided by the software system and the results are being monitored throughout the consultation period.

It is intended that the programme following the close of the consultation on the 20th January is as follows:

- The Closing date for the consultation is 20th January 2020.
- Results analysed and discussed together with suggested amendments to the strategy with the Climate & Ecological emergency EAP in February
- A paper setting out the findings of the consultation and a suggested revised strategy will be reported to Place and Resources Scrutiny 25th March
- Report presented to Cabinet on 6th April
- It is intended that the final strategy and action plan are signed off by Full Council 15th April 2021

The Sustainability Team have continued to develop areas for action throughout the consultation period to ensure that following final approval Dorset Council is as best placed as possible to deliver the actions identified in the Strategy and associated Action Plans.

Question 4

Submitted by Cllr Matt Hall

Dorset Council employs a number of agency staff. Please could the Portfolio Holder confirm what financial impact that has on the various budgets compared to an alternative system where Dorset Council only employed Council contracted Staff?

Response by Cllr Peter Wharf

The Council uses agency staff for operational reasons. Many of our services would not be able to properly function and deliver important services to the public without this flexibility. For example when vacancies arise, and before replacements can be recruited, resource levels have to be maintained otherwise service performance would be effected. Some front line services include the use of agency workers in their workforce strategies.

There are also national skills shortages in a number of occupational areas, for example social care, planning, engineering and legal services. Sometimes use is made of agency workers to cover those gaps.

At the moment we have 220 agency workers in place, this constitutes around 5% of the total workforce.

For the reasons I have explained some use of agency workers is unavoidable if we are to deliver good quality services to the public. The impact on budgets is mixed. In service areas where it is known that agency workers will be used then this is built in. In areas where it is less likely then the cost would normally be met, at least in part, from the underspend accruing from the vacancy being covered. Although the cost of agency workers is often higher than employees, that is not always that case.

Question 5

Submitted by Cllr Matt Hall

Why are not all Dorset Council jobs posted on the Council's website?

Response by Cllr Peter Wharf

It is in the gift of the recruiting manager to decide, or for certain senior posts it is for the Portfolio Holder. We regularly advertise posts internally only.

When vacancies arise, an assessment is carried out to determine the best approach to advertising. Factors that are taken into account include the likelihood of there being internal candidates, the chance to provide opportunities for our own employees career development, the state of the current external job market, the number of vacancies (when there is more than one) and the potential benefit to bring in new people to the organisation.