

## **Councillor Questions for Cabinet 5 October 2021**

### **Questions from Cllr Paul Kimber**

#### **Question 1**

From the national news many communities will be welcoming Afghans refugees, can you tell me how many refugees Dorset Council will be welcoming to our county.

Also, the need for support for the Afghan community is the Dorset council actively reaching out to community Groups that can assist.

#### **Response from the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety**

Dorset Council has agreed to participate in the national Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP), which prioritises relocation in the UK for those who worked for the British Armed Forces. The number will be determined by the availability of suitable housing and local support services. We issued a press release and appeal for housing on 27/08/21. We have sent this appeal to local community groups, local media and hundreds of landlords. We are looking for offers of additional housing from private home owners and landlords, and are not proposing to use social rented housing. From 30 offers of help we have been able to confirm one property as suitable and affordable and the first family is expected early November 2021. We are in a similar position to most local authorities in the South West. As a local comparison, BCP Council have also secured one property to date. We are in ongoing conversations with landlords, Ministry of Defence, local charities, community groups and local media to seek further housing so that we can welcome more Afghan families.

We have successfully resettled over 86 Syrian refugee families in Dorset and have very good knowledge and experience of refugee support needs. We have put this provision in place for Afghan families via our in-house resettlement staff and a local charity who currently support Afghan refugees in Bournemouth. We have contacted all the local community groups across Dorset already involved with the Syrian community to explain our plans and priority need for housing. We are actively supporting Community Sponsorship in Dorset, an additional government scheme where a local community group sponsor a refugee family – we have approved two groups so far and a third is at an early stage of the Home Office application process. We are working very closely with our Armed Forces Covenant Coordinator, MoD military services and charities to prepare further support or specialist help for Afghans who were employed by the UK Forces. We have responded to over 200+ queries and offers of help from people and groups across Dorset, we are keeping a record of all offers that may be suitable or needed by Afghan families depending on their location and individual needs. We have established links at local DWP, Job Centres, Dorset Police, Citizens Advice, School Admissions, Dorset CCG and English tuition providers to prepare support for the families arriving in Dorset.

#### **Question 2**

[Timetable consultation - South Western Railway December 2022.](#)

In partnership with Network Rail and the Department for Transport, there is a stakeholder consultation on proposals for December 2022 timetable.

This is a strategic review of future service levels affecting our local services.

As many of you will know rail Passengers in Dorset and the wider Southwest communities are unhappy about the cuts in train time frequency.

- With recent concerns about overcrowding and a need for a return to the twice hourly service to and from Weymouth to Waterloo service.
- The need to attract people back to the railways and relieve overcrowding for the public on our rail service.

SWR timetable consultation From Dorset Council.

**Could I see Dorset council written response to the consultation.**

### **Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment**

The answer is yes and the report will be emailed to you following this meeting.

### **Question 3**

I wish to ask at the next Cabinet meeting a question regarding two prominent buildings on Portland. The first building is the modern Dorset Council owned Fortuneswell Primary School, which has been empty for years and is a constant unexplained talking point on Portland. The second building is derelict and ugly Hardy Block, owned by Comer Homes, which is very prominent and visible to everyone arriving on Portland; first impressions of any place are crucial.

As we know, the Government has established a high priority Levelling Up Agenda. In the last week, this policy shift has been given added prominence by the appointment of Rt Hon Michael Gove as Secretary of State for the new Department of 'Levelling Up, Housing and Communities'. Interestingly local government has been replaced by communities in the departmental branding. As a result, local government may have to prove its community credentials.

Regarding the new government focus on Communities, it is often forgotten that Weymouth and Portland reside at the lowest levels of Government Indices for wages and social mobility. To place this in context Portland and Weymouth were hit badly by the Royal Navy Closure in 1995, with a long-term community impact equivalent to the closure of FOUR pits.

I have put forward an outline strategy for using the empty Fortuneswell Primary School as an easy in easy out business start-up centre. The location, classroom, and hall space layout would suit this and fit well with the levelling-up and communities' agenda. Location-wise, Portland has the largest blue-collar demographic in Dorset, many of whom support independent living for many of the sub-regions elderly and retired. Without this support, responsibility would fall onto the Dorset Council Social Services budget.

The Hardy Block has a variety of conversion options. The one that would support Portland's young, blue-collar demographic would be conversion to affordable rental housing. The wing that doesn't face the sea could easily be converted into an easy in easy out business start-up centre as expansion space from a successful Fortuneswell Primary School conversion or as a replacement if other long term uses are identified for the school.

The above is a reminder that Dorset Council needs to find a way of retaining young people and families in the County. There is self-interest in focusing training and start-up business support in vocational skills that will support independent living for Dorset's disproportionate aged resident population. The wake-up call may well come with the initial Census results that are likely to show a continuing trend of young people and families leaving Dorset.

**My question is - When will we see the community supporting proposals on the Hardy Block supplying new homes for rent and the new empty Fortuneswell Primary School being used for medium-term vocational business start-ups that will support Dorset's ageing population?**

#### **Response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning**

**Cllr Kimber raised this matter in a question to the Council meeting in December 2020. The response given at that time stands and is set out below for ease of reference**

*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.*

This site is in the ownership of Comer Homes. Homes England as the Government's housing delivery agency has previously offered grant funding to support viability of the development of the new-build phase three of the site. This grant offer from Homes England was not pursued by Comer Homes, however it is understood that Homes England is aware of the issues of this site and could look favourably upon any fresh approach from the site owners.

The Osprey Quay School premises are in the process of being surrendered by the Aspirations Academy Trust back to Dorset Council. The Council in turn is in negotiation with the Department for Education over the re-use of the site for new education provision. Whilst there is no defined timescale for the re-use of the site, whilst those negotiations are ongoing the site would not be available for any alternative use.

#### **Question 4 from Cllr Brian Heatley**

At item 8 on the Agenda Cabinet are asked to make the climate and ecology a priority in the Dorset Plan (p.89). I welcome this as will a wide range of people and groups in Dorset who suggested this during the consultation on the Plan.

At item 6 on the Agenda the paper notes the priorities in the Dorset Council Plan as it was on adoption in February 2020 as part of its framework for the budget process for the 2022-23 Budget and Medium-Term Plan. These priorities did not of course then include the climate and ecology.

Could we have an assurance please that if Cabinet agrees the proposal in item 8 to make climate and ecology a Corporate Plan Priority, it will be treated as priority along with the others in the 2022-23 Budget process?

#### **Response from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Commercial and Capital Strategy**

"Yes, I confirm that if Cabinet agrees the proposal in item 8 to make climate and ecology a Corporate Plan Priority, it will be considered as a priority alongside the others in the 2022-23 Budget process"