

Full Council – 12 October 2023
Questions submitted by Councillors

Question 1 – submitted by Cllr K Clayton

On September 9th the first Dorset CoP took place in Dorchester. This was a very successful and inspiring event. Attendees included a number of high-profile climate activists, a number of Dorset Council officers, and 5 Dorset councillors. Unfortunately, none of these councillors were from the controlling party. Whilst the portfolio holder has my full confidence, this wider lack of support, together with the recent ‘watering down’ of the Government’s climate actions, could imply a lack of commitment – that our climate crisis is not the priority it needs to be. Should the residents of Dorset be concerned?

Response by Cllr R Bryan

Dorset Council has put tackling climate change and supporting our natural environment as a core priority in our 2022-2024 council plan, and we refreshed our strategy this year to reiterate our commitment to a carbon neutral, nature positive and resilient Dorset, spurred on by the decisive and acute warnings of the IPCC’s Sixth Assessment Report. The council has made a substantial commitment to its delivery, including through a £10m capital programme which forms part of a wider £70m investment programme largely utilising external funds, and our progress was recognised through our nomination for best climate action at this year’s Association for Public Service Excellence awards. I remain as committed as ever to delivering on this generation defining challenge. Nothing has changed.

As I have made clear on a number of occasions, the council cannot achieve this alone. Our residents will be at the heart of our journey to a greener, cleaner Dorset, and it is notable that public concern about climate change is significantly higher in the South West than in other regions of the UK according to government’s own public attitudes tracker. The Dorset COP event was a clear indication of this, with a constructive day of discussion and debate. Our officers attended not only to ensure that the council’s position was represented and understood, but also to learn from our residents themselves on how we might better facilitate wider change, and took an active role on the day. The COP was an exceptionally well-organised community event that was a testament to our residents’ seriousness about net zero.

Notwithstanding the coverage of the government’s recent announcement, it should be noted that the Prime Minister’s recent statement recommitted the UK to net zero, and there were positive commitments including the boost to the grant for heat pumps. The acknowledgement that tackling our emissions and the cost-of-living crisis hand in hand is a principle that I am sure many of us here would agree with. As such, from a local leadership perspective, nothing has changed. I remain committed to our ambitions that are set out at the heart of our council plan. I am not watering down our commitments, and I will continue to work with colleagues throughout this organisation and beyond as part of the leadership required to meet our collective

ambitions to protect and enhance our environment and climate. Local leadership matters, and that comes from all sections of society throughout this wonderful county of ours.

Question 2 submitted by Cllr B Trite

Assuming that Dorset Council is successful in its commendable objective of becoming carbon neutral in or by the year 2040, do we yet have an estimate (at present monetary values) of what the total net cost of achieving this will have been to the Council between 2019 and either 2040 or any earlier date of neutrality? If we don't, when will such a projection be available?

Response by Cllr R Bryan

Dorset Council has clear ambitions to deliver on its natural environment, climate and ecological strategy, and these ambitions are also clearly articulated in our council plan. As a council, we are currently delivering a programme that is worth around £70m, which includes a £10m capital investment from this council. As I have stated on many occasions, it is not possible for the council to fund all of the change required on its own, and to date we have been extremely successful in securing external funds for programmes such as the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme and for Low Carbon Dorset, which alone have a combined value of £35.5m. We are committed to continuing to source these external funds, ensuring that the costs to the council remain as low as possible. As part of our ongoing programme, we are determined we will be ready with off the shelf plans when we are asked to bid for money from either government or private bodies. We are also in the process of creating a programme that will help residents decide how to reduce their personal carbon emissions.

Given the changing legislative environment, the rapid development of technology and the way that we are trying to embed different ways of working within existing budgets to reduce our environmental impact, it is not possible to predict net costs for the council from now until 2040. However, we will continue to ensure that we get best value from our own and external investments, and we are actively looking at invest to save models in areas such as renewables and storage where it should be possible to deliver financial returns and savings that would result in no net costs to the council.

Question 3 – submitted by Cllr M Parkes

Before the dissolution of East Dorset District Council, a plan was created to improve Ferndown Town Centre.

There is an urgent need for these plans to be revived and updated and for the residents of Ferndown to be reassured that Dorset Council will deliver the improvements that our Town Centre needs.

Dorset Council owns several prominent assets in Ferndown that allow for a brilliant opportunity to improve Pennys Walk and the surrounding area. At a time when several major retailers are exiting the town, a proactive approach from Dorset Council would be welcomed in Ferndown. Will the relevant Cabinet member give me the assurance that plans for Ferndown will be progressed and delivered please?

Response by Cllr S Gibson

Dorset's Market and medium sized towns are hugely important. They provide employment, entertainment and social services both for those living in them but also the communities that surround them. Ferndown is no exception.

The council is very conscious of the role that these towns play within the wider economy and will be looking to develop a specific strategy document, as an addition to the Economic Growth strategy, that recognises this role and sets out how the council will look to support the economic development of Market Towns and medium sized towns. This document will recognise the recent good work undertaken by communities such as Bridport where they have produced an Investment Plan and Blandford where a small public / private partnership is emerging to develop positive change and growth in their area. I have asked the relevant Overview Committee Chair to consider starting this work and I am delighted that Cllr Jones has agreed.

With specific regard to Ferndown, the plans developed by the former East Dorset District Council provided a positive vision for the future of Ferndown. It remains a good plan and I agree with the local ward Councillors that the plan ought to be revisited and refreshed.

The Regeneration Service will work with officers across the Council to deliver improvements to Ferndown Town centre and will work with Ward Councillors to ensure that the commitments made to Ferndown are progressed. Funding via Dorset Councils Shared Prosperity Fund allocation will be provided to help achieve this.

Question 4 – submitted by Cllr A Starr

NUTRIENT NEUTRALITY

Following my recent question to this council regarding stories in the press about the scrapping of EU derived laws that provide much needed protection to the natural environment, I was reassured that this council would be watching the situation carefully and making representations to the government if required.

There has been a stop on new house building in the Dorset river catchment areas to prevent more nutrient run off causing eutrophication, particularly in my ward of Lytchett & Upton, which includes part of the very vulnerable Poole Harbour.

The recent announcement by the government, that Planning restrictions on nutrient run off are to be scrapped in favour of a promise to increase investment in a nutrient mitigation scheme, is very worrying. This would seem to be letting the developers build new homes and having the public pick up the bill for mitigation. It would also

seem that the extra pollution could well be an issue long before the answer to the problem is in place. The Environment Agency seems to be very quiet on this issue at present. Can I ask then if it is going to work in Dorset?

Given that this council has declared an environmental and ecological emergency, can I ask if any representation has been made to the government about this issue. Have we assurances that funds are available from Central Government to put in place nutrient mitigation before houses are built or will the local taxpayer be expected to cover the cost?

Response by Cllr D Walsh

The House of Lords on 13 September voted against the Government's proposed amendment to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill that would have seen the end of nutrient neutrality rules for new development. This means that development in the affected catchment areas will still need to demonstrate nutrient neutrality in order to be permitted. We are still waiting for the final details of the Bill to be confirmed and for it to receive Royal Assent.