

PLACE AND RESOURCES OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

NOTES OF INFORMAL MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2022

Present: Cllrs Carole Jones (Chairman), Les Fry (Vice-Chairman), Pauline Batstone, Toni Coombs, Sherry Jespersen, Val Potheary, Maria Roe, Andrew Starr and Roland Tarr

Apologies: Cllr Ryan Hope

Also present: Cllr Tony Alford, Cllr Richard Biggs, Cllr Cherry Brooks, Cllr Ray Bryan, Cllr Robin Cook, Cllr Jean Dunseith, Cllr Beryl Ezzard, Cllr Simon Gibson, Cllr Barry Goringe, Cllr Rob Hughes, Cllr Paul Kimber, Cllr Rebecca Knox, Cllr Nocturin Lacey-Clarke, Cllr Laura Miller, Cllr Louie O'Leary, Cllr David Shortell, Cllr Jane Somper and Cllr David Taylor

Officers present (for all or part of the meeting):

John Sellgren (Executive Director, Place), Jonathan Mair (Corporate Director - Legal & Democratic Service Monitoring Officer), Matthew Piles (Corporate Director - Economic Growth and Infrastructure), Karyn Punchard (Corporate Director for Place Services), Peter Hopkins (Corporate Director - Assets and Property), Michael Hansford (Highways Assets Manager), Elizabeth Murray (Strategic Parking Project Manager), Paul Rutter (Service Manager for Leisure Services), James Potten (Communications Business Partner - Place), Rebecca Forrester (Business Intelligence & Performance) and Lindsey Watson (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The Chairman provided the following statement:

'In the light of the situation with Covid-19 case rates, Dorset Council's Chief Executive - Matt Prosser has exercised his delegated powers to continue to hold virtual informal committee meetings.

Where a decision is required, committee members will express a 'minded to' decision in respect of recommendations set out in officer reports, with decisions being taken under officer delegated authority in the light of 'minded to' decisions expressed by members in the virtual meetings. Any decisions or recommendations required will be confirmed by the appropriate officer at the conclusion of the committee's debate on an agenda item.'

51. Declarations of interest

A Starr declared an interest in respect of agenda item 7, 'Proposed Blue Badge Car Park Charging Policy', as his wife was a holder of a Blue Badge.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that it was appropriate for Councillor Starr to participate in this item.

52. Chairman's Update

The Chairman provided an overview of how she wished to run the meeting, including the order for committee and non-committee members participating.

In addition, the Chairman noted that a Joint Overview Committee was to be formed for members of the two overview committees to undertake work jointly on the Dorset Council Libraries Strategy. The joint committee would be formed of 10 members and nominations from the overview committees were currently being sought from the political group leaders.

53. Public Participation

Two questions and a statement had been submitted from members of the public. A copy of the questions and the statement read out at the meeting and the responses provided, are set out at Appendix 1.

54. Questions from Members

There were no questions from councillors.

55. Dorset Highways Asset Management Plan Review 2021

The committee received and considered a report of the Head of Highways, which sought support and the recommendation to Cabinet, of the revised Highways Asset Management Policy and Strategy.

Councillors discussed the issues arising from the report and points were raised in the following areas:

- Maintenance of bridges and structures to ensure safety. Spending had to be prioritised and a robust inspection plan was in place
- Concern expressed with regard to reference in the plan to 'managed decline'
- A request that Highways budgets were not sacrificed for budgets in other council areas
- Links to the Local Transport Plan and Local Plan
- There would be further consideration of the council's future infrastructure strategy
- The key role for proactive or preventative maintenance
- Councillors could contact Community Highways Officers with specific issues.

It was proposed by S Jespersen seconded by L Fry

Recommendation to Cabinet

That the proposed revised Highways Asset Management Policy and Strategy, which is a summary document of the revised Highways Asset management Plan (HAMP), be approved.

The Executive Director of Place, having heard the debate, confirmed the 'minded to' recommendation to Cabinet, under delegated powers on behalf of the informal meeting of the Place and Resources Overview Committee.

56. **Proposed Blue Badge Car Park Charging Policy**

The committee received a report and presentation from the Strategic Parking Project Manager which sought support for a new pan-Dorset Blue Badge Charging Policy. The policy sought to align the former Council policies into a new policy for Dorset Council, to bring consistency and fairness to Blue Badge holders who park in Dorset Council car parks.

Councillors considered the issues arising and discussion was held in the following areas:

- Support was expressed for aligning the policy across the Dorset Council area
- A Blue Badge and Restricted Mobility Parking Permit could be applied for from the council at the same time
- The proposed policy recognised that Blue Badge holders required additional support by means of increased time for parking and was not based on any financial benefit
- Enforcement issues were raised and would be further considered as part of future car parking reviews
- Signs in car parks were being updated and information would be included on the council's website.

It was proposed by V Potheary seconded by S Jespersen

Recommendation to Cabinet

That the new pan-Dorset Blue Badge Car Park Charging Policy be approved.

The Executive Director of Place, having heard the debate, confirmed the 'minded to' recommendation to Cabinet, under delegated powers on behalf of the informal meeting of the Place and Resources Overview Committee.

57. **QE Leisure Centre Future Management**

The committee considered a report of the Service Manager for Leisure Services with regard to the future management arrangements for the QE Leisure Centre.

Councillors considered the issues arising from the report and discussion was held in the following areas:

- The aim was for the council to support the trustees of the Queen Elizabeth School to continue to run the centre and provide facilities for the community and local clubs and organisations
- The need to provide equitable support and opportunities for all leisure facilities across the Dorset Council area was highlighted
- The importance of the centre to the local area was recognised
- An overview of the work undertaken to date and committee involvement was provided
- An overview of the support to be provided by the council during a transitional period was noted – the 2-year transition period would provide the time to explore opportunities with the school
- The council would continue to support the leisure centre during this period, which would include capital works
- Decisions on how the centre would be operated were for the school to make, but the council was committed to working to support the school during the transition phase.

It was proposed by S Jespersen seconded by V Potheary

Recommendation to Cabinet

1. That the Executive Director of Place is instructed to write to Queen Elizabeth School Foundation Trustees to give formal notice to withdraw from the dual use management agreement on the 31.3.24.
2. That officers continue to engage with the school during this transitional period and work with them to approach the Education and Skills Funding Agency to apply for exceptional circumstances funding in recognition of the change in contractual arrangements.
3. That officers work alongside Queen Elizabeth School in identifying ways to maximise the availability of leisure facilities for school and community use and provide advice to any displaced users who may need assistance in identifying opportunities to maintain their activity levels.
4. That a bid for one off capital funding (up to a max of £150,000) should be included in Dorset Councils 2023/24 capital budget process. If successful, this funding would be Dorset Council's contribution towards the replacement of the All-Weather Pitch.

M Roe indicated that she was not in support of the recommendation above.

The Executive Director of Place, having heard the debate, confirmed the 'minded to' recommendation to Cabinet, under delegated powers on behalf of the informal meeting of the Place and Resources Overview Committee.

58. Place and Resources Overview Committee Forward Plan

Councillors noted the committee's forward plan and items scheduled for future meetings.

An additional meeting of the committee had been scheduled for 7 March 2022 at 10.00am, which was a single item meeting to consider a report on 'Anti-social Behaviour Public Spaces Protection Orders', which had been deferred from this meeting.

59. **Urgent items**

There were no urgent items.

60. **Exempt Business**

There was no exempt business.

APPENDIX 1 - PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Agenda item 4 - Public Participation

Questions from Mike Carhart-Harris, resident and Wimborne Athletic Club member

As a Wimborne resident and member of a group (Wimborne Athletic Club) that uses QE Leisure Centre, I am deeply concerned about the recommendation that Dorset Council withdraws from the management of the centre. This would put well-used services for the school, community, clubs and vulnerable groups at grave risk of loss. This includes QE's swimming pool, crucial for giving children vital life-skills of swimming and water safety.

I would like to submit the following two questions addressed to Cllr Laura Miller at the Place and Resources Overview Committee on Thursday 10 February:

1. It is fair to ask whether the subsidy to QE Leisure Centre of £550,000 a year, a third of the council's leisure budget, represents value for money. However, it is not fair that the community of Wimborne and QE school could potentially lose vital health, fitness and sports services because of an historic funding anomaly rather than any proven lack of need or viability. As it is not clear from the report, can the council explain why the funding arrangement for QELC was allowed to become so disproportionate in comparison with Dorset's 7 other leisure centres?
2. Many Dorset leisure centres are managed in partnership with commercial leisure operators or social enterprises, or are wholly community owned, while continuing to be subsidised. However, the option for QE School to explore such an alternative operating model, which could ensure the continued availability of its existing facilities, is given little consideration as this would require ongoing subsidy. Rather than withdraw its funding from QELC entirely, why can the council not develop a more equitable distribution of subsidies that would enable all

8 existing leisure centres to continue to provide services to their communities?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Customer and Community Services

Prior to Local Government Reorganisation in 2019, all funding allocated to leisure facilities was determined by each of the predecessor councils. Whilst I understand the concerns raised, we will continue to support the school in identifying ways to maximise the use of their facilities for pupils and the community. It should also be noted that there are seven other public leisure facilities within a 20 min drive time of Queen Elizabeth Leisure Centre as well as several large private and budget leisure clubs that will continue to serve Wimborne area communities well. This is very different to other parts of the Dorset Council area where health, fitness and sports facilities are more dispersed and difficult to access. This relatively high level of choice for local residents in the Wimborne area, and competition against the QE facilities, have unfortunately had a detrimental impact on QE's usage numbers and income at a time when operating costs have continued to rise.

The Council's leisure review looked at several different operating models, all of which would still require significant ongoing investment from the Council. We will continue to talk with the school and support them in exploring all opportunities available to them. The recommendations in the report today will, in my view, support a more equitable distribution of leisure funds across Dorset and enable the Council to target areas most in need.

Statement from Ross Bowell, Wimborne Academy Trust

Dorset Council's predecessor councils have operated joint use leisure facilities at Queen Elizabeth's School since 1974, and the current dual use agreement runs until 2086.

The school and trust's strong preference is that Dorset Council accepts the views of the overwhelming majority of respondents to the public consultation and retains the joint use arrangements for the benefit of the local community and the current and future pupils of the school.

Withdrawing from the agreement early may realise a saving for the Council's Place budget but it also has a direct cost of £279,500 per year of central government funding which will be removed from the Dedicated Schools Grant (see section 15).

However, as the Council seems determined to proceed, it must leave the school with a suitable facility.

This was recognised by the Corporate Director of Place in a meeting with the school and trust on 7 January 2021: “Dorset Council understands that there will be an upfront cost to re-provide at a reasonable standard. The revenue savings would offset this”.

The exit proposals and capital sums set out in this paper are wholly inadequate to meet this commitment.

The Council and its predecessors have been the managers and majority users of QELC over nearly 50 years and have under-invested in maintenance and renewal. Many building services are original, dating back to the 1970s and 80s, are hugely inefficient, and are long overdue for replacement.

This is set out in detail in the April 2019 Dorset Property condition survey quoted in this paper, where the Council’s own surveyors identified capital expenditure required of £1,165,720 to 2023/2024 and a further £714,050 in 2024/25. An independent survey would likely find the costs to be greater still.

The paper as presented makes a virtue of:

- opportunistically exploiting a contractual loophole to walk away from an arrangement made for community benefit that has lasted for almost 50 years and is due to run for over 60 more, and
- knowingly transferring existing liabilities away from the council on to the school, ultimately to the detriment of the education of pupils in Wimborne and East Dorset.

The Council should commission an independent condition survey, remodelling design and life-cycle costing services to properly establish the works required to re-provide at a reasonable standard for the school, and commit to funding the capital cost of these works.

The costs will be a small proportion of the value of the Place budget revenue savings over the medium term and will allow the Council to show that it is at least acting properly.

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Customer and Community Services

Prior to the condition survey undertaken in 2019, property surveyors representing the Council and School have on an annual basis undertaken a building review and recommended a schedule of prioritised maintenance works to be completed over the following three years. This schedule has always been agreed by both parties, with the school contributing 40% of the costs and the Council funding the rest.

The dual-use agreement has a clearly defined clause within it that allows the Council to withdraw from the management agreement at any time, providing it gives 2 years notice. This agreement was agreed and signed by all parties.

As highlighted in the report, Dorset Council is committed to meeting our contractual obligations prior to any withdrawal and will be recommending further investment in the all-weather pitch. We will also continue to positively engage with the school during the transitional period and any concerns raised will form part of these ongoing discussions.

Duration of meeting: 10.00 am - 12.08 pm

Chairman

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