

Full Council – 18 February 2020
Questions from Councillors

Question 1 – submitted by Cllr John Worth

“In the light of the on-going pressures on the council budget, would it not be more prudent, that rather than continuing with the sale of assets inherited from the legacy councils, Dorset Council, where appropriate and possible, forms its own development company in order to maximise profits and create an ongoing revenue stream?”

After all you can only sell an asset once whilst a prudent investment can keep giving”.

Response from Cllr Tony Ferrari

In order to provide for the needs of Dorset Council, now and in the future, a mixture of both capital receipt and revenue income will be required from our property assets.

The Council holds a significant number of income producing assets in locations with strong occupier demand and rental growth prospects. Examples include the significant number of industrial estates across the County that, as well as generating a positive income return provide economic development benefit in providing suitable space for local businesses. The sale of income producing assets is generally only proposed where there is considered to be a significant risk to the income stream with a lack of growth potential or where there may be an opportunity to release enhanced value as highlighted by the proposed asset sales list.

Generally the type of assets identified on the list do not have obvious potential to obtain change of use to generate a positive income stream without significant investment and development risk.

As part of the work we are currently undertaking in preparation for the first draft of the Council’s new Asset Management Plan, we are pulling together a wide range of information regarding the properties which the Council owns in order to inform our future property policies. This piece of work will identify which properties give a positive benefit for the Council and the tax payer and which do not. We will be looking at the investment potential of the properties, together with development potential, including economic regeneration.

We will now go into a broad consultation in respect of all of the properties we are intending to sell. We will be informing MPs, Councillors, Town and Parish Councils and local interest groups to obtain their views. In some instances it will be difficult to work out which groups might be interested in the property so we will contact the local councillors to ask them who else we should add to the consultation list. As part of this process we will consider all opportunities, including those for retaining the asset to provide an income stream and we would welcome proposals from councillors to that effect.

The Council has the in house capability to design and build on sites that it owns and the ability to secure finance at competitive rates if suitable alternative use can generate positive returns from further investment. We have considered development company options in the past and might again in the future but there is little justification for the administrative effort and cost for the projects we are currently pursuing. This may change in the future as plans for our assets evolve.

Question 2 – submitted by Cllr Maria Roe

“Wimborne Town Football Club was founded in 1878 and has a long and proud history of achievements. The Magpies are in the Southern League Premier Division South. It is a committed community club that runs teams for 250 boys and girls, a ladies team, and it has two teams for people with disabilities. The club has several paid employees and runs a successful clubhouse with functions throughout the year.

The Football Club is located in an area known as Cuthbury which is to be developed into a housing estate. The club is due to move to a new football ground off the Leigh Road at Parmiter. The original S.106 agreement made in 2018 imposed a number of obligations on the developer which had to be complied with before development started on the new site. One requirement was that the new football ground at Parmiter had to be completed before the development of the site began at Cuthbury to ensure a smooth transition for the club.

A member of the public contacted me in late November to say that the situation had changed significantly. I discovered in December 2019 that a Deed of Variation had been made which enabled the developer to start work on the existing site before completing the new football ground in Parmiter leaving the club potentially homeless. This means that there is now a very high risk that the football club may have nowhere to play; for a semi-professional team, and also the local community, the consequences of this are catastrophic.

The Deed of Variation was carried out through delegated powers without any scrutiny or consultation. The football club was not informed, the ward members were not informed, town council and parish councils were not informed, and this is simply not acceptable.

My question to the portfolio holder is simply this: what will Dorset Council do to put this situation right?”

Response from Cllr David Walsh

The deed of variation allows the commencement of development, and the occupation of affordable housing, on the Cuthbury ground before the Parmiter ground is completed. However the developer remains obliged to evidence progress with the new football ground, with requirements that a detailed specification for the stadium is agreed with the Council before any development on the Cuthbury ground takes place. No market units can be occupied on the Cuthbury ground until the new ground is completed.

We are aware the developer has chosen not to renew Wimborne Town Football Club's lease at the Cuthbury site when it runs out in May. This is a legal matter between landlord and tenant over which the Council has no control and a route which the developer was always entitled to take to enable site clearance and preparation to take place.

The Council is seeking to work with the developer to ensure the timely completion of the new football ground. We understand that the developer is currently aiming to hand over the football pitches to the football club in August, with the club house due to be handed over in September. We acknowledge that there is a period of uncertainty for the football club in the interim and officers will be exploring options with the developer and the football club, as a matter of urgency, to seek a position where the football club has certainty for the interim period.

Question 3 – submitted by Cllr Nick Ireland

Agenda item 13 (Pay Policy Statement) highlights the fact that Dorset Council as an employer pays a lowest salary of £17,364 per annum, which equates to an hourly rate of £9.02 at the council's 37 hours working week.

By contrast, according to the Living Wage Foundation, the real, minimum living wage is currently £9.30/hour (outside of London).

Other unitary authorities, Cornwall being a prime example, have not only moved to pay all their staff a minimum of the foundation real living wage but have gone much further in insisting their contractors and suppliers do the same as contracts come up for renewal. This encourages staff retention and loyalty and brings benefits the local economy.

Given the regular appearance of various localities of Dorset Council's demesne in indices of child poverty, social deprivation and low-wages, and considering the much repeated aspiration for Dorset Council to be 'an employer of choice', will the Leader as a minimum commit to ensuring all Dorset Council employees are paid at least the real living wage as established by the Living Wage Foundation and that this is revised appropriately on a yearly basis?

Response from Cllr Peter Wharf

The Council is required, under the provisions of the Localism Act to publish a Pay Policy Statement. The purpose of this is one of transparency so that anyone who is interested can see the numerical relationship between the highest paid and those at the median. It is therefore simply a matter of fact.

In producing the Statement, I have not reviewed the approach to setting pay levels. To do so properly would be a very significant task and not one that would be undertaken on an annual basis.

As the Member points out the Council aspires to be an Employer of Choice. There is already a good deal of work underway and which will continue for the next few years in order to underpin this aspiration.

One important aspect is to review the employment offer that is the terms and conditions the Council puts in place in order to recruit and retain the best workforce possible. Although we are at an early stage I would welcome the input of the appropriate Committee. This would give us all the opportunity to better explore all of the issues in the round, including the level of pay and how that relates to the Living Wage.

I'm happy to discuss further with Cllr Ireland outside of this meeting.

Question 4 – Mike Parkes

Ferndown Town Centre – Regeneration Strategy

In 2016 the former East Dorset District Council, working with Ferndown Town Council and Dorset County Council, commissioned consultants to investigate the feasibility of regenerating Ferndown Town Centre which involved extensive surveying of the buildings, open spaces, businesses, traffic flows and analysis of pedestrian footfall. The research culminated with a series of consultation sessions with key stakeholder groups and members of the public.

Following completion of the report, the Ferndown Town Centre Regeneration Strategy was approved by the sponsoring Councils in April 2017.

The strategy document identified seven projects which contribute towards a first phase of implementation with a second phase to be developed subsequently.

The advent of LGR meant that the only one of the seven projects was feasible for implementation prior to the council changes and money was ring-fenced from the former East Dorset District Council to make improvements to the Barrington Centre.

The work on the Barrington Centre is shortly about to commence, however at the time it was recognised by the representatives from each of the councils that this was one of the lower priorities but at the time was the most likely to be delivered.

Notwithstanding this all were expectant and assured that the plan would move across the new Dorset Council.

Ferndown, like many other town centres across the country, has an economy that continues to decline and is unappealing to residents and visitors. The town struggles to retain existing businesses and is unlikely to attract new business without urgent investment that is needed to revitalise a dated town centre that has had little or no attention since the early 1980's.

Can I please have an assurance that there is still a commitment to implement the Ferndown Town Centre Strategy and how the priorities contained within it will be overseen by Dorset Council, with an indication of what funds will be made available and the timescales for implementation of the various stages?

Response from Cllr Gary Suttle

The need for the regeneration of Ferndown Town Centre was recognised and addressed in the Strategy, which was received by the former local authorities ahead of local government reorganisation.

The importance of vibrant and sustainable towns was highlighted recently as the Council consulted on its Draft Economic Growth Strategy. There are many towns and High Streets across Dorset facing challenges and needing investment to improve infrastructure, viability and productivity. The new Council will need to take stock of the situation across Dorset and evaluate how it can best enable an appropriate response at a strategic and more local level.

Following the creation of Dorset Council, the various Directorates impacted by the strategy and responsible for the provision of services to the Ferndown area are being reviewed and restructured to make them fit for purpose. The outcome of the reviews and implementation of blueprints for change will have implications for how services are delivered, and the buildings used for these purposes. Combined with the review of Council assets and properties this requires that the Ferndown Town Centre Strategy be reviewed within the wider context of service provision, economic growth and Council resources.

Question 5 submitted by Cllr Ryan Hope

Question - Crematorium and the high levels of Nitride Oxide being produced

Weymouth Crematorium is located within my ward Westham, an area described statistically as an area of deprivation. The Crematorium is a very built up area and is close to four schools, three being primary schools, and Budmouth Academy.

There was recently a press release in the Dorset Echo regarding Weymouth Crematorium and the high levels of Nitride Oxide being produced.

Around 95 per cent of coffins used in cremations are made from chipboard/MDF and funerals using these types of coffins produce the same amount of NOx gas as a car driving 2,280 miles or 3,650 cars driving past the crematorium during the course of a cremation.

People exposed to nitrogen oxides over a long period may experience respiratory issues and reduced lung function that can limit an active lifestyle. As well as the health implication this council declared a climate emergency July 2019 and oxide is a greenhouse gas.

Please can you tell me:

- 1) What plans do DC have for installing NOx filters into the Weymouth Crematorium and others in Dorset to reduce the levels of Nitride Oxide currently being exposed to our communities in Dorset?
- 2) What information is being given to bereaved families to equip them with the information they need to make more environmentally friendly, informed choices when saying goodbye to their loved one?

Response from Cllr Tony Alford

Weymouth Crematorium is the only crematorium operated by Dorset Council and it operates under an Environmental Permit imposing stringent Government levels on emissions to ensure public safety. The Crematorium was amongst the first in the UK to install modern emission control technology and uses continuous monitoring to demonstrate compliance.

Nitrogen oxides are not included in current Government emission control requirements but this may change in the future.

There are very few crematoria that have emission controls for nitrogen oxides and these tend to be new facilities where the abatement plant is installed as part of the build. However, the council is in discussion with manufacturers to assess the feasibility of retro-fitting at Weymouth Crematorium and the likely cost. I will ensure that the outcome of this work is reported to Council.

Bereaved families make arrangements for their loved ones through Funeral Directors and the Council has less influence here. However, there is a growing trend for more environmentally friendly funerals and we will continue to liaise with Funeral Directors on this issue.

Question 6 submitted by Cllr Andrew Kerby

Dear Chair,

We are incredibly lucky in the new Dorset Council to have elected members that genuinely care about our younger people. I know that many of the fresh – and not so fresh faces are actively involved in providing a youth service for our young adults, teenagers and children. Whether that be directly through youth work, running a charity or in many cases, both.

I'm fortunate enough to volunteer with my young people, a role I take incredibly seriously. We have some excellent youth centres – many are far more successful now than they ever were under the former Dorset County Council (DCC) and I very much recognise the hard-work and dedication that paid staff and volunteers contribute to ensuring our young people have a safe space to learn and grow.

This success of our community youth provision is made even more remarkable considering that many of the youth charities and groups, still, after all these years, have serious unresolved issues as a direct result of what I believe was a badly planned and implemented transfer. Officers responsible for executing the dissolution of Dorset County Council's former youth service currently view the transfer programme as a success, including the transfers where through no fault of the community groups or children, youth centres sat empty for years. Other youth charities have been left to pay thousands in fees, to rectify legal situations following botched transfers – taking money that should have been spent on providing frontline services.

Can we as Dorset Council acknowledge that there **are** and have been serious issues in the transfer of the youth service provision by the former Dorset County Council to the community, and that these problems are causing difficulties to community groups and are consequently damaging to our younger people.

Does Dorset Council agree to launch a full (no stone left unturned) review into the former DCC youth service transfer, not with an aim to reverse a decision, but to ensure learning takes place and is embedded into the new Council? Where the review encounters issues caused by the youth service transfer, I ask that steps are taken to rectify the problem and if necessary, funding from Dorset Council is sought to remedy the situation, so that no young person should mis-out or be made vulnerable as a result of poor administration and execution of policy by this council or previous councils.

Response from Cllr Andrew Parry

I am grateful for the question raised by Councillor Kerby, also for the warm welcome I was given by staff, volunteers and young people when I recently visited the Blandford Youth Club. I share his sense of achievement where community groups have been able to develop thriving youth clubs in assets which the former County Council had agreed to transfer to them, along with the huge range of sports, uniformed, and performing arts groups and others in Dorset which provide things to do, places to go, and opportunities to make a positive contribution.

But it is regrettable that he feels the need to raise issues of concern about the transition arrangements for the transfer of youth centres. I would ask him to supply updated details to the Executive Director – People – Children, so that she can investigate these concerns.

Children's Services is about to create new locality teams which will be community based and bring together a range of professionals in an integrated service. Crucial to this will be the role of targeted youth workers who will be using their unique skills to focus on the contextual safeguarding of teenagers, that is understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families.

In discussions with the Leader & Executive Director for Children, we recognise the benefits in the setting up a cross-council Executive Advisory Panel (EAP), tasked with examining the predecessor Council's youth offer. On the advice of the Monitoring Officer, the findings from this EAP, should be reported through the Peoples Scrutiny Committee and onto cabinet.

I will be formalising these arrangements with the scrutiny committees Chairman Cllr Somper, this week. I hope Cllr Kerby and other Councillors with a keen interest in Dorset Council's commitment to children & young people, will wish to participate, so that, going forward we can all have renewed confidence in our Youth Offer.