

## **Cabinet 5 May 2020**

### **Questions from Councillors**

#### **Question 1 from Cllr Brian Heatley**

Many commercial boat owners using our harbours are not eligible for the Small Business Grants Scheme to help small businesses unable to trade because of the Covid 19 pandemic. This is because they don't pay Business Rates. While there is now a specific scheme to help commercial fishing businesses, there are many other businesses such as charter angling concerns that remain without help. These businesses are important in themselves for our tourism and leisure industries, but also attract many visitors to Dorset who go on to use our restaurants, pubs and accommodation. The support of the Council in asking Dorset MPs to lobby the government on this anomaly is much appreciated. However, the Council itself could assist by waiving or reducing its harbour dues and berthing fees rather than just deferring them as it has promised to do.

If it's right to help small businesses with free parking in Council car parks, how about free berthing for our boat based businesses? And a holiday from other harbour dues which could be clawed back if the government does eventually offer more substantial help?

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

*Thank you for your question.*

We know the immense pressure that business owners find themselves in as a result of this unprecedented situation, and we have been feeding back to Central Government that some of our Dorset businesses fall through the gaps of support being offered by them and the small business grants currently available. We and our local MPs have been lobbying Central Government to support businesses that are ineligible for the newly introduced grant schemes. Our advice is that commercial businesses operating from our harbours should continue to monitor the various forms of assistance to determine their eligibility for small business grants and other government support as these may change, such as the bounce back loans scheme launched this week.

As you are aware Dorset Council is under extreme financial pressure at this time and will be for the foreseeable future. There are hundreds of businesses across Dorset who do not pay business rates and are in a similar position to the charter boat businesses. Dorset Council are not in a position to provide support to all of these businesses. This is a national problem being experienced by other harbour authorities and wider groups of local businesses. Local Authorities are helping to deal with the impact of COVID-19 in many ways, working to support of central government policy.

For commercial berth holders we are, however, offering a payment deferral of up to three months and will continue to monitor the situation and any changes to Government support.

#### **Question 2 from Cllr Nick Ireland**

“In the Covid-19 report (agenda item 7), it states under 13.14 that “the financial impact of COVID-19 on Dorset Council’s budget has been significant ... including ... renting and converting a hotel into a hospital”, yet available capacity in our Acute Hospital (Dorset County) is currently significantly much more than anticipated and our Community Hospitals are equally underutilised. Given that the facility provided by renting hotels was designed to take the now unrealised pressure from our hospitals for apparently only non-medical discharges, and that my previously asked question as to set-up costs of this ‘hospital’ was unanswered, what has been the total cost so far of this seemingly unnecessary facility and what is the average ‘occupancy’ rate in percentage terms?”

(Two questions in there, so I’ll be asking two supplementaries ...)

#### **Response from Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care & Health**

Following Covid specific directives issued in March by the Department of Health & Social Care, Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, LGA

NHS and Dorset Council led the rapid response of commissioning of services to enable the safe discharge of individuals, with a non-covid19 diagnosis who were medically ready, from hospital settings as per the requirements of the pathway 1 guidance. The purpose of these rapid discharge dictat was to enable hospital

capacity to be maximised to manage the predicted covid-19 demand, and this in turn would protect the NHS capacity and save lives.

We were required to deliver additional capacity and Local Authorities across the UK established many arrangements with businesses including hotel and hospitality companies to enable this without impacting further on the existing social care capacity which was, and continues to be, under pressure.

Essex County Council notably booked in excess of 300 beds for this purpose within hotels.

The service was to support our residents to optimum recovery therefore enabling them to return home or to further assess their needs and put in place appropriate support.

Excellent response in providing this capacity so quickly and gave confidence across the system Business community pulled together to provide a very agile response.

The aim was to increase capacity for those leaving hospital who were unable to return home immediately and provide an alternative additional care provision.

The fact that this capacity has not been needed at scale to date is a very positive outcome in this unpredictable pandemic.