

Public Questions and Answers

Question 1 from Chris Bradley

Agenda Item 7: "Covid-19 Response"- PPE

The Covid-19 pandemic has cut short over 21,000 lives, more than 40,000 if deaths in care homes are included. 117 people have died in Dorset hospitals, with 697 currently infected.

Those who care for us are putting their lives on the line each time they go on duty in a hospital or care home.

The deaths of 119 health workers and care staff have been reported (The Guardian, 27 April 2020).

There has rightly been great and serious concern about the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) available to healthcare staff.

The BBC Panorama Programme (broadcast 27 April 2020) revealed that crucial PPE to cope with a pandemic had not been stockpiled, as it should have been. There were no gowns or visors in sufficient numbers to protect the lives of those on the frontline in hospitals and care homes.

There is evidence of the impact of the lack of PPE in Dorset, too. Healthcare staff are putting their heads above the parapet to share their fears.

We learn from a nurse on the frontline in Royal Bournemouth Hospital of shortages of PPE. Staff carry out assessments of suspected and confirmed Covid-19 patients without proper protection, making use of flimsy aprons, surgical masks and goggles or visors rather than the FFP-3 masks which should be worn and gowns covering arms and uniform. Staff who refuse to work in these unsafe conditions have been threatened with disciplinary action.

Two staff members are being treated in the Intensive Care Unit as a result of contracting Covid-19 in the hospital.

There are "dozens" of Bournemouth Hospital staff in self isolation with suspected Covid-19 who have not been tested. The Dorset Pathology Service is only carrying out limited testing. Symptomatic staff are not being swabbed.

The people of Dorset should be made fully aware of the full facts concerning the safety of the courageous people risking their lives to save others from Covid-19.

I urge Dorset Council to act as the champion of Dorset health professionals and Dorset people.

Could the Cabinet please advise:

Is the Council satisfied that sufficient PPE is available to fully safeguard all Dorset staff whose work places them at risk of contracting Covid-19 or becoming carriers?

If not, then what is the Council doing to ensure that for their own staff, and, through NHS partners that NHS staff, that PPE is available to fully safeguard all staff whose work places them at risk of contracting Covid-19 or becoming carriers?

Many frontline staff are working close together in cramped conditions where social distancing is impossible. Again, what is the Council doing to safeguard such selfless staff against infection by Covid-19?

Response from Cllr G Carr-Jones

Tragically Covid-19 has claimed the lives of many thousands of people worldwide and

I would like to extend my sympathy to all of those in Dorset and further afield who have lost a loved one.

I would also like to extend thanks to all of our staff. Whether you are caring for the elderly or vulnerable or keeping other vital services running - thank you.

Dorset Council does not run hospitals and I cannot answer questions about the availability of PPE within the NHS.

I can only answer for Dorset Council and reply that the Council has worked hard and has secured PPE for council workers and for non NHS partner organisations which have not themselves been able to secure sufficient supplies.

I am grateful to central government which has provided some supplies of PPE to the Council. With the help of military planners we have distributed these supplies fairly amongst our own services and our partners. The Council has supplemented these supplies by investing very significantly in buying PPE to support key workers across Dorset.

It is easy for the questioner to make generalised remarks about staff being at risk by working in cramped conditions where social distancing is not possible but we are working hard to protect all of our staff, whatever their roles. Where it is possible to do this staff are working from home. Other staff are in frontline roles where they cannot work from home and managers are making sensible decisions about how to apply national guidance on the use of PPE to keep service users and staff safe.

We have systems in place to monitor our stocks and usage of PPE. Guidance on the usage of PPE can change but we hold sufficient stocks and will continue to buy more on an ongoing basis.

**Question 2 from Caz Dennett
(on behalf of Extinction Rebellion)**

Question on Upcoming Full Council Meetings

Last week we learned that many Councils in Dorset are holding decision-making meetings online. Here we are today at Dorset Council's first online Cabinet Meeting.

In an article in the Dorset Echo on Weds 27th April Councillor Spencer Flower, Leader of Dorset Council was reported as saying:

"Continuing democracy is of the utmost importance, and all political parties making up Dorset Council have worked together to identify the meetings which must take place over the coming months.

"Hosting virtual meetings enables council to make decisions on items related to COVID-19 as well as business-as-usual matters, whilst ensuring the health and safety of councillors, colleagues and the public in line with public health guidance."

What provisions are there to enable Full Council meetings to take place as scheduled on 14th May, 16th July and, should some COVID-19 restrictions remain, 15th October 2020? Can we expect these meetings to take place through a virtual platform as required? If not what would prevent this?

Response from the Leader of the Council

Thank you for your question.

It is important that democracy should continue and that is what we are doing in this meeting today, using the freedoms and flexibilities given to us by government to hold virtual meetings.

We will continue to hold virtual Cabinet meetings as well as virtual meetings of Overview and Scrutiny, Audit and Governance, Area Planning Committees and the Licensing Committee so that we can decide items related to Covid-19 as well as business as usual.

There will be a meeting of the full Council on the 11 June, but with the agreement of group leaders this will be a reduced meeting to deal with procedural business only.

The other Full Council meetings you mentioned in your question will not be held as originally planned. It was also agreed that the Annual Council will now take place on Thursday 3 September at 6.30pm in the County Hall Council Chamber, subject of course to government guidance COVID -19 nearer the time.

The Cabinet and most of our committees have a membership of 10. Whilst it is practical to hold a virtual meeting of that size there is a great deal of work to be done before we could contemplate running a virtual meeting involving all 82 councillors.

Question 3 from Debby Monkhouse

Agenda item 7 – Covid -19 Response

Residents are concerned that any democratic deficit that has arisen during the COVID 19 crisis is urgently addressed, to ensure that there is democratic accountability for the urgent decisions that the Council is making.

At Full Council on the 18th February 2020, Councillors overwhelmingly agreed that "to provide the Council with the good governance arrangements needed, to enable the Council to be effective and efficient, and achieve its ambitions for Dorset's communities - Member led and governance lite", the existing Scrutiny committee structure would be replaced in May with a framework more suitable to meet these aims.

Could the Council Leader please explain why these new committees don't seem to be being established, given the importance of policy development and scrutiny, especially given the circumstances we find ourselves under?

Response from Leader of the Council

Thank you for your question.

The Council's new governance arrangements are important to me, so much so that I presented them to the last Council meeting and moved that they should be adopted. That makes it all the more disappointing to me that the implementation of the new arrangements has had to be delayed.

In ordinary times the Council is required to hold an annual meeting at which the Chairman of Council, the Leader and committee chairmen are elected. The annual meeting is usually held in May and involves all 82 councillors. Our new structure was to have been introduced from the annual meeting on 14th May 2020 when councillors would have been elected to chair and appointed to serve on our new committees.

As a result of the exceptional times we find ourselves in the Government has made regulations removing the need to hold an annual meeting.

There is still much uncertainty around the duration of lockdown and social distancing measures but I do not anticipate a full Council meeting to make appointments to our new structure being held before 3 September 2020.

This delay to the implementation of our new committee structures will not though prevent scrutiny of the Council's response to the Covid-19 emergency from taking place and I hope that later in this meeting the Cabinet will accept the recommendation that we refer the Council's response to the Covid-19 emergency for scrutiny by other councillors.

**Question 4 from Irene Statham, and supporting statement
(on behalf of Extinction Rebellion)**

Dorset Council currently faces extreme challenges and we very much appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's meeting.

The pandemic has demonstrated that when we all come together, organisations and individuals can make extraordinary changes at a pace few would have believed possible. We believe that this spirit can be harnessed to tackle the ongoing climate crisis.

Our neighbouring councils - Devon, South Somerset, and Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole - already have climate emergency strategies and action plans. Here in Dorset the local Town Councils have also made good progress in developing action plans, with some already in place and being delivered.

On 15th April Extinction Rebellion sent an open letter to the CEEEAP asking that the anniversary of DC's Climate and Ecological Emergency Declaration on 16th May be marked by publishing the Strategy and Action Plan for Dorset. Cabinet members were sent copies. (Please find another copy attached). To date no answer has been received and we are now asking for a clear timetable and outline of procedure.

The new Dorset Corporate Plan makes the Climate and Ecological Emergency 'a crosscutting priority for all our work'. The Council's Chairman stated on the unitary authority's anniversary that 'to address the challenges of climate change was, and still is, the most underpinning part of our wider agenda'. DC have outwardly expressed a political desire to treat the climate emergency with urgency but a year on there is no

visible outcome.

We are concerned that the CEEEAP has not met since 23rd January 2020 and that, although the intention is to meet virtually, no date has been set for the next meeting.

We are concerned that the commitment, knowledge and balance provided by the members of the CEEEAP are not being fully utilised.

We are concerned that the undoubted expertise of the relevant officers may not be fully engaged in the formation of policy.

We are concerned that impossible demands are being made on one person (however competent and committed), by combining the Climate Emergency portfolio with the already huge responsibility of Highways, Transport and Environment. (See my question to the cabinet in July 2019)

We are concerned that there may no longer be a mechanism by which the two motions tabled by Cllrs Daryl Turner and Kelvin Clayton in July 2019 and 'referred to the CEEEAP for further consideration and report back to the full council' can be returned to the full council.

Question

When and through which channels will DC publish and implement its Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy and Action Plan?

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

Dorset Council has had to significantly change the way we do things in the wake of the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, but work on our Climate & Ecological Emergency strategy and action plan has continued, albeit at an understandably slower pace.

Our ability to consult, openly discuss and make key decisions regarding the adoption of any proposed action plan has also been disrupted, causing delays. While this is unfortunate, we have a duty to act in the best interests of our residents and right now that means joining the rest of the global community to tackle the more immediate emergency posed by coronavirus.

That said, we recognise that the Climate and Ecological Emergency remains. We will present the draft strategy and action plan to councillors at our next Executive Advisory Panel for Climate Change meeting, which we are in the process of setting up. In the meantime, we ask for patience and understanding at this unprecedented time especially as we begin to consider the long-term challenges the Council faces as a result of the pandemic.