

Questions from Councillors for Cabinet 30 June 2020

Question from Cllr J Orrell

COVID-19: How well has Dorset Council responded to meeting the needs of vulnerable groups during 'lockdown'?

The prompt action of all councils across England in providing hotel accommodation for the street homeless under government mandate within 48 hours saved lives at the peak of the pandemic. One notes that the availability at the offered prices came from parts of Weymouth with the highest deprivation. The majority have accepted help and some have been rehoused. A small minority however are concentrated in a narrow area and have caused much anti social behaviour. Now the peak is passed and other providers are opening it is time for urgent action. Those with no local connection need to go back to their towns where they have support services, mental health teams , addictions workers and housing options.

1) Can I have a firm date in July by which time only persons with a genuine link to Weymouth will remain in Richmoor/Mon Ami/Riviera hotels?

(optional extra question if first one does not give firm date)

2) Can the council immediately use it's existing estate and identify buildings that can be rapidly converted into hostel use, with the same speed and rigour as shown by those who build the Nightingale Hospitals, so they are ready by August ?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety

In answering this question I think it useful to provide some context. The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017, places a legal duty on local authorities so that everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness will have access to meaningful help, irrespective of their priority need status, as long as they are eligible for assistance.

Under the Homelessness Reduction Act, everyone in a local housing authority's district should be able to access free information and advice on:
preventing homelessness

- securing accommodation when homeless

- the rights of people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, and the duties of the authority
- any help that is available from the authority or anyone else
- how to access that help.

Dorset Council is the housing authority and has to treat anyone coming to the Council for support from Dorset and will establish a local connection to Dorset. It cannot take into account which part of Dorset the person is from, although it does need to consider what support a person would have from friends and family in their local community. It is not legally possible to restrict the placement of a homeless household to a particular town, but where possible this is always the preferred option if following discussions with the individual a preference is specified. However, a shortage of suitable temporary accommodation in Dorset does limit the options available to the Council.

It should be noted that if a person is accepted to join the housing register currently they have to be nominated to a former district or borough area as the old system from the legacy council days is still in operation. Going forward, once the new housing allocations policy is adopted, restriction to an area may not apply as it is proposed there will be one single Dorset connection rather than to the former district or borough.

The Council has now secured the use of a hostel in Purbeck area and a number of people are and will be moving across to this accommodation, particularly those that have identified a link to the East of Dorset.

Therefore it is not possible to give a date to the specific question as legally the Council cannot do what is requested.

Officers from property services are looking at the existing estate to see if there are opportunities to convert something to a hostel. Any potential site identified

would need to meet building regulations and planning criteria, but everyone is aware speed is of the essence in identifying alternative accommodation solutions.

Question from Cllr G Taylor

Would the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety agree that the COVID pandemic has shone a light on the homeless problems in Dorset. It is a disgrace that in the 21 century we have over 300 individuals and families who are in temporary accommodation and I'm sure this is still an under-estimate. COVID however has given us the opportunity to change this and to have a positive outcome but it needs this council to take and own the issue. These are all our residents, they are not imported from elsewhere, they are all individuals and they all have stories that have led to them being in this situation, they should be treated with respect.

Would the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety:

- Propose positive steps in a timely manner to increase our temporary housing provision, and also the support required to enable tenants to retain tenancies. Can I have assurances that this council is investing in increasing the amount of temporary housing and are actively seeking grant funding from Government to help us take these residents permanently off the street. In addition to this, in the review of the Housing Allocation Policy, can he consider how social housing can be used to provide more accommodation for homeless people although in this, I am mindful of the need to still provide housing for those who are not adequately housed.

This virus shines a light on how many additional properties we need, just to house our residents. I hear time and time again from residents that we don't need any more houses in Dorset; that we have enough. This is appalling, unacceptable and is from residents who have a roof over their heads.

Would the Portfolio Holder for Planning

- Ensure that the planning authority listens to the needs and gives due weight to the silent minority – those who do not have a roof over their heads. These residents do not attend our planning meetings or bombard councillors with emails but they are still our residents and are equal to all other residents. We need to build our way out of this mess and planners and the planning committees need to take note of the needs of all our residents.

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety (in respect of the 1st part of the question

The Council is working in partnership with a number of agencies such as citizens' advice to ensure there is advice and information available to those who are concerned about paying their rent and losing their tenancy. This includes signposting advice to benefit support and credit unions and trading standards advice about avoiding loan sharks. We are also engaging with private sector landlords to remind them of their legal responsibilities regarding eviction proceedings and asking them to contact us if they have concerns about a tenant so everyone can work together to prevent a household becoming homeless.

The drive to increase the amount of properties for use as temporary accommodation remains a key priority for the housing team. The Council offer a private sector lettings management service and any landlord with a property can lease their property directly to the council for them to manage on their behalf. We are working on promoting this scheme in order to secure more properties for use as temporary accommodation.

Following the announcement on the 24th June that the Government is providing a further £105 million to support local authorities in ensuring that people currently accommodated in emergency accommodation do not return to the streets, officers will be working with colleagues from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government to prepare a number of bids to increase the accommodation options for homeless households such as supported housing and hostels.

Discussions have taken place with our 3 main registered housing providers (RP) and they have offered to directly let a number of properties to the Council for use as temporary accommodation. This does however mean that for every property offered one less is available for social rented opportunities so there is a fine

balance to be struck. However, the council can let rooms individually as a house share which a RP cannot do.

In light of the high numbers accommodated in B&B accommodation and to move people into longer term settled accommodation any property advertised on Dorset HomeChoice will take priority for housing in the short-term. This will include anyone in hospital who cannot return home and anyone in a refuge. It should be noted however, that although priority is given to those in temporary accommodation this does not include those properties with a s106 or rural connection criteria in place.

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning (Part 2 of the question)

Question from Cllr B Heatley

The table below shows in summary form the impact of Covid on the finances and the consequential proposed action for Dorset Council and two neighbouring comparable unitaries, BCP and Wiltshire.

Council and source	Addition al spending £m A	Received from central government £m B	Fundin g gap £m C = A - B	D Free reserves year start £m	Multiple reserves would be spent C/D	Proposed Action
BCP Cabinet paper 24 June pp 145-186	52 based on 24 weeks	22	30	15	2.0	Proposals for a budget mitigation strategy for full Council in July
Wiltshire Cabinet Paper 9	80 based on 6 months	30	50	15	3.3	Potential Sn 114 unbalanced budget

June pp 27-34 + Draft minutes						situation. In year mitigating action will be required.
Dorset Cabinet paper 30 June, pp 40-41	60 based on 4 months, £15m a month	21	39	28	1.4 but 2.5 if 6 months and spend is 90	?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Commercial and Assets

While our funding gap is a smaller multiple of free reserves than the other two councils, it is still significant and our estimates are based on a four month additional spending period and their's on six months. Should not we too be facing up more explicitly to a situation where our budget has become unbalanced?

The question illustrates, only too clearly, the difficulty in planning in a world with so little certainty about the future. Your first point is about peer comparisons. Our position is clearly better than many in our peer group, we did enter the pandemic in better financial shape than many other Unitaries. Your second concern was the period we have used for modelling our recovery. The end point of C19's impact will not be a sudden step back to normality at either 4 months or at 6 months. There will be a progressive and inconsistent recovery which we are clearly already seeing take place. Some recovery will be faster than 4 months, we are already collecting some car parking income, for example. Some will take longer than 6, we anticipate a long recovery in council tax and business rates to reach pre covid-19 levels. Overall we are comfortable that the 4 months we have

used for modelling gives us a position that reasonably represents the challenges we are facing.

Having said that we are taking steps to mitigate the financial position. We are cutting expenditure wherever possible, for example we have given notice on the Allenview House and Princess St buildings. We have more rigorously considered the allocated reserves, particularly those inherited from predecessor councils. This will make more general reserves available. We have curtailed the current capital program. We are still making tactical investments but we no longer believe that the sorts of substantive projects we were considering will be the priority for a post Covid-19 administration. We have immediately started work on what will emerge as the 21/22 Capital Program, part of the budget exercise. We are also still vigorously addressing Government both via our MPs and the various Council networks to ensure the reality of Local Government Finance is understood at Westminster.

None of these approaches will fix the problem. The 21/22 budget will be very different from that which we had anticipated at the beginning of the year but we do not believe that precipitate action is necessary and we can manage the undoubtedly uncomfortable future using our normal business processes.