

Public Questions – Cabinet 8 September 2020

Question 1 from Alistair Chisholm

In view of the ongoing crisis in the affordability of housing for younger working people in Dorset, does the cabinet have any plans to build or provide “Council Houses” to meet the growing need for the same ? If not, why not ?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Safety

Dorset Council is a non-stock holding authority it does not have a Housing Revenue Account and therefore is unable to access finance and borrow money to build houses in the same way Councils with their own housing stock can.

The Council works closely with registered housing providers, for example Aster, Magna and Sovereign to whom the former District Councils transferred their housing stock many years ago. This close working relationship ensures that they are building affordable housing both for rent and purchase.

Registered Housing Providers have the advantage of being able to borrow money with less restrictions than Dorset Council to build houses. They are set up to manage the maintenance and repairs of their properties, something the Council currently does not have the capacity to do on a large scale.

The Cabinet will be considering a report that seeks approval to invest £4.8m over 2 years to increase the amount of accommodation for use as temporary accommodation for homeless households.

The Council is also using its own land through the Building Better Lives Programme to bring forward extra care housing and affordable housing in partnership with registered housing providers. The Council will continue to investigate using the land it owns for affordable housing schemes.

In addition the Housing Enabling Team work with communities to support and develop community land trusts in their local area to bring forward affordable housing for local people. There have been a number of successful projects delivered in the past 18 months. There are also schemes progressing and in development with affordable housing as an offer. The Council's Opening Doors Website <http://www.openingdoorsdorset.co.uk/> gives more information on affordable housing schemes in Dorset as well as information on Community Land Trusts.

Question 2 from Alistair Chisholm

In view of the proposed changes to the Planning System, will the Cabinet consider classifying the DOR 15 site, to the north of Dorchester's water meadows, as a "Protected Zone" which cannot be developed. If not, why not ?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning

The proposed changes to the national planning system have been published for consultation and the Cabinet will be agreeing a response at its October meeting. We do not yet know whether the proposals will be changed as a result of the consultation before they are implemented, and so it would be premature to make any decisions about how areas of land might be zoned.

Should the proposals be implemented as set out, the council will need to meet a binding housing target, and will need to identify sufficient land as 'growth' or 'renewal' areas to meet that target. This land will need to be in locations that minimise the distances that people need to travel to meet their everyday needs. Consultation would take place at the start of the process to enable people to make proposals as to which category they believe certain areas of land should be in.

Question 3 from John Calvert

I was surprised to learn that both our Dorset Council and also Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole Council are presently using outdated government housing figures in their preparation of their Local Plans. We need more affordable housing in Dorset but we should be looking at need not at unreliable targets. It is also particularly important for our Dorset Council to encourage a reduction not only of their own target but also to encourage challenge in the Bournemouth et al figures as they might want Dorset Council to take the greater part of their commitment which could lead to lot more houses being required in our Dorset Council area.

In the light of this and research which I believe shows how inappropriate the government figures are, and the cross party support for planning on the basis of need, will the Cabinet support planning on the basis of need and thereby challenge the government's figures?"

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning

The Government has set a standard methodology for working out housing numbers for each council area, and this must be used as the starting point for the housing numbers in local plans. There is a consultation currently taking place on changes to this methodology. The Planning White Paper, also published for consultation currently, proposes longer term changes which would include binding housing targets that councils must meet.

The next stage of the Dorset Council local plan will be a major public consultation and there will be the chance for people to give us their views on the housing numbers. However in developing the proposals, the council will need to use as its starting point the national methodology as amended by the current consultation. The council is also obliged to consider whether it can meet any unmet needs from neighbouring areas.

If the White Paper proposals are implemented as currently set out, the housing number will be a binding target set by Government, with no opportunity for it to be challenged locally. There would however no longer be the requirement to consider meeting adjoining areas' needs.

The council will be responding to both national consultations.

Question 4 from John Calvert

Disabled access to Dorchester

It is still a disgrace that there is no proper disabled access to Dorchester West and to Dorchester South railway stations.

Regardless of responsibility for the necessary changes why is our Dorset Council not pressurising those responsible to move and produce plans to solve the problems?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment

Thank you Mr Calvert for the question.

Dorset Council have been working with Network Rail for a number of years now to construct a ramp from Williams Avenue to the northbound platform. Dorset Council have contributed over £200,000 to the scheme and secured contributions from Network Rail, Developers and Town Council and as a result, planning permission was gained earlier in the year and Dorset Council have been working with Network Rail to go through the legal procedures necessary to build the ramp. The works have been tendered and Network Rail have appointed a contractor and will over the construction.

There are some legal aspects that still need to be completed such as land transfers and the "stopping-up" of a small section of highway but we are now looking at detailed programming for a construction start date.

There is funding in place to improve access to the east bound platform only. This won't resolve the issue of crossing between platforms. Successive applications to the Access for All fund to install lifts or ramps on the existing bridge have been unsuccessful to date, but we recognise that the current situation is unacceptable and continue to work with the railway industry to find a solution.

Question 5 and 6 from Caz Dennett (South West Action on Pensions)

Dorset Council's C&EE Strategy outlines how the Council will deliver a realistic and achievable approach to ensuring a carbon-neutral Dorset by 2040, with the aim to reduce the bulk of its carbon emissions before this date. It states to achieve this there will be a need for "imaginative and innovative solutions".

The draft strategy makes no mention of accounting for the carbon emissions produced by Dorset Pension Fund's fossil fuel investments (currently 7.3% of the pension pot).

Question

When will Dorset Council include the carbon emissions from fossil fuel investments made by Dorset Pension Fund in its calculated carbon footprint, to ensure an accurate and truthful measure?

Question

Can Dorset Council imagine divesting the Pension Fund from fossil fuels and adopt this as a solution that helps achieve a net zero-carbon Dorset?

Response from the Leader of the Council

Thank you for these questions. The Dorset County Pension Fund is overseen by the Pension Fund Committee which acts on behalf of 317 participating organisations, not just Dorset Council.

I have therefore referred these questions to the Pension Fund Committee to consider at its meeting on Thursday 10th September.

Question 7 from Peter Bowyer

On 07.08.20 Councillor David Walsh announced at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils that there would be a "Dorset People's Local Plan". This term cannot be traced to any papers submitted to the Council.

Whilst it is welcomed that the Council acknowledges the importance of having a "Dorset People's Local Plan" it is unclear whether the Council has ever adopted this title or had any meaningful engagement with the residents of Dorset and their communities over the emerging Dorset Plan other than a consultation on the Statement of Community Involvement and two meetings with Parish and Town Councils in January and March 2020.

Can the Council please state how and when the residents of Dorset and their communities will be able to assist in the creation of a vision for the "Dorset People's Local Plan" other than responding to any consultation in late 2020/early2021?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning

The Dorset Council Local Plan will take account of all the input that local communities and organisations have made so far to the preparation of the previous district-wide local plans. There have also been meetings with a range of organisations including the town and parish councils, and a 'call for sites' exercise seeking proposals for development site allocations. There will be a major stage of consultation starting early in 2021, which will be conducted via a variety of communication methods including online, social media, and face to face events subject to any Covid 19 restrictions at the time.

Question 8 from Peter Bowyer

Consultations on the Planning White Paper and the New Planning System. When will the Council be able to make available its draft responses to these important consultations? The residents and communities of Dorset will be more informed by the early sharing by the Council of its draft responses.

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning

There are two national consultations taking place currently. One is on interim changes to the current planning system, with a closing date of 1 October: the other is the White Paper that proposes radical changes to the planning system. The council will be responding to both consultations: the Planning White Paper response will be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 6 October, and the committee papers will be available five days beforehand as usual. The closing date for this consultation is 29 October and so the draft response will be available in good time to enable residents and communities to see it before the final deadline. Later in 2021 the draft plan will be made available for anyone to comment on its 'soundness' before it is submitted to the Secretary of State for independent examination.