

Cabinet 19 January 2021

Public Questions

1. Question from Cllr Lucy Hamilton (Weymouth Town Council)

Local Government Finance Reform

Can Cabinet confirm that Dorset Council is pushing for reform of local government funding?

The Local Government Association is calling for a multi-year core local government funding settlement. The LGA calls for reform and review of local taxation, which is currently based on 1991 property prices. The LGA calls for a complete review of business rates, where currently multipliers are controlled by central government. To improve the build-out rates of homes with planning permission, the LGA proposes that **councils should be able to charge developers full council tax for every unbuilt development from the point that the original planning permission expires.**

Central government funding for local services is at an historic low. Government funding to councils has fallen by 60% since 2010. As a result, funding for essential services in Dorset falls on the shoulders of council tax payers more so than in many other counties.

Residents and businesses need Dorset Council to speak up for fair funding for local services. The burden shouldn't fall on the shoulders of those who can least afford to pay it.

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Commercial and Strategy

Thank you for your question. I can confirm that Cabinet is pushing for reform of local government funding.

There are a number of aspects to this.

Firstly, there is Dorset's own funding. It is cabinet's view that Dorset Council's funding from Government is insufficient for the services needed by our residents. Many other, wealthier Councils continue to receive Revenue Support Grant (RSG) from Government, but we don't. Dorset's funding is almost entirely locally raised, and this funding source does not match local needs or the costs of their delivery. This leaves Dorset Council no choice but to set one of the highest council tax charges. We therefore continue to press for a rethink of the Council tax and business rates agenda.

Secondly, the Cabinet believes that the level of funding made available to local government in total, is insufficient. We just have to look at financial challenges faced by Adult and Children's social care to see this.

Thirdly, we need financial certainty. Government funding is currently announced on a 1 year basis. We want and need to develop long term financial plans and to do that we need multi-year financial settlements.

I can assure you that we are continuously making these points to government through our memberships of the Local Government Association and the County Council Networks. And we are also making the point directly through our MPs, and through our direct links with MHCLG. Last week our Leader met with Luke Hall, the Minister of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and made these very points on behalf of the Council. And yesterday he also wrote to the Secretary of State for Health & Social Care, restating the need for multi-year settlements for the Social Care part of his role not just Health.

2. Question from Cllr Lucy Hamilton (Weymouth Town Council)

St Mary's School Shaftesbury

My question relates to Agenda items 7 Budget Strategy Report and 9 Children's Provision.

On 7 January, Dorset Council confirmed that it aims to buy St Mary's School near Shaftesbury. This is to improve services for children and adults. How will this purchase be financed?

St Mary's School near Shaftesbury is an enormous rambling Victorian building set in 55 acres of grounds. The school lies just over the border, in Wiltshire. I assume Dorset council tax payers will contribute to its purchase, maintenance and running costs.

I welcome investment in the future of our children and vulnerable adults. I would rather this investment stayed within Dorset. At sustainable locations, close to our big towns. Close to our families.

As part of local government reorganisation, there was a fire sale of Dorset County Council properties across the county. Well-used local centres, in our communities and on a human scale, were put up for grabs. Last year, Dorset Council pledged to divest itself of properties.

Government rightly requires local authorities to care for children and vulnerable adults. Government should pay for these essential services.

Response from the Leader of the Council

The St Marys site in Shaftesbury has been purchased through the use of capital funds. Its usage is subject to formal consultation but it would be expected that any future use would be expected to either be self-funding or offset revenue spending that would have otherwise been incurred elsewhere. The site comprises buildings of various ages that may be suitable for a range of uses to support the provision for Dorset children and young adults. We are also keen to maximise the best use of

government funding wherever possible to provide for the people of Dorset and actively seek to attract such funding to the county.

3. Question from John Calvert

As someone who lives off Weymouth Avenue in Dorchester, I support the proposal to spend some of the Community Infrastructure Levy Funding on the stretch of pavement outside the market on Weymouth Avenue. I myself in recent years have tripped over and gone headlong due to uneven paving and I have known a neighbour who sustained facial injuries due to a similar fall. This is also where the coaches drop off visitors and where people walk down to town from Fairfield carpark so it is well overdue for both residents and visitors.

My question is this. Do we have to wait for similar funding before other places where visitors arrive in Dorchester are improved or moved?

For example, there is the cramped space where buses drop people off in Trinity Street and there is the continual problems of access to both the railway stations.

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment

Highway improvement projects are identified on a case by case basis and form part of a programme of maintenance. Details of defects and reports of trips or falls help the council make decisions about which improvement schemes to prioritise. Dorset Council utilises the most appropriate funding sources available when addressing necessary improvements.

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There is only enough funding granted to Dorset Council on an annual basis to deliver a proportion of improvement schemes that are proposed, meaning that individual schemes are developed and prioritised for delivery against others across the whole County. The Council also seeks to utilise external funding to deliver highway schemes where possible and depending on the criteria and objectives for that funding.