

**Full Council
16 February 2021
Questions from Councillors**

Question 1 – submitted by Cllr Andrew Kerby

During the COVID pandemic, the majority of Dorset residents have followed the law by staying at home and only leaving for essential reasons. The lockdown for many, including myself has been particularly difficult, with families split and children unable to attend school. Though I get frustrated with the lockdown, I understand the need to reduce the amount of interactions to slow the spread of Coronavirus.

I find it exasperating that over lockdown and the tier restrictions that a minority of holiday lets and guesthouses are still remaining open for business, in clear breach of COVID measures. This is wrong and I feel very little seems to be done to enforce those rogue businesses and individuals. Additionally, I believe that many of these 'rogue' let's have claimed government grants designed to support closed businesses over the tough lockdowns. This is fraud and is taking funds away from legitimate struggling industries.

My concern is that Dorset Council is not being proactive enough in identifying rogue businesses, nor acting on information passed to the council from residents and the police. There is the additional worry that Dorset Council is failing to use its own data to identify potential fraud – particularly around government grants. I ask for assurance that Dorset Council is taking all necessary steps to ensure that our residents are safe and that fraud to the taxpayer is swiftly acted on.

Upon doing my own research, I have found just how easy it is to book a property online using some well-known national websites, with no questions asked to whether my stay was legitimate. I ask members to join me in condemning those online holidays letting websites, that are still operating and putting the lives' of our residents at risk.

Response from Cllr Jill Haynes

As regards keeping people safe, from the first Lockdown until now, regulatory officers within Community and Public Protection have been operating as a combined virtual team, following up complaints and answering business enquiries on closure and permitted safe opening. Where issues are not enforceable by the Council, or support is required, Police liaison follows – remembering that the Local Authority can deal with the behaviour of businesses not customers' behaviour which is a Police issue, including the wearing of face coverings.

All complaints and enquiries are responded to whether it involves licensed premises, food businesses, close contact personal services or all manner of

other businesses and activities by a range of organisations. Businesses in Dorset have attained very high levels of compliance without the need to resort to formal action, although not without initial resistance in all cases. When the law, or the tiers of control, have changed is when these enquiries and complaints have spiked.

There have been exemptions for many businesses to continue to operate, sometimes in modified ways. Investigation has often revealed legitimate refurbishments and other activity taking place in some premises. If any resident or community representative is concerned about a business being open when it should not be or is concerned with how it is operating they are encouraged to report this and [details are on our website](#).

The website has continued to be an up to date reliable starting point for any such enquiry, with links to Government guidance and specialist health and safety material.

The officers working on this are from Licensing and Community Safety (Licensed premises); Food, Safety and Port Health (Food premises) and Trading Standards (anything else). Covid Marshals, managed through Licensing and Community Safety, also add eyes and ears to Covid breaches by businesses as well as assisting with issues in the high streets of Dorset.

Response from Cllr Gary Suttle

I thank Councillor Kerby for raising this issue.

The national restrictions state that during this lockdown period accommodation such as hotels, hostels, guest houses and campsites should close except for specific circumstances, such as

- where these act as someone's main residence
- where the person cannot return home
- for providing accommodation or support to the homeless
- or where it is essential to stay there for work purposes.

The restrictions are also clear that overnight stays and holidays away from primary residences will not be allowed - including holidays in the UK and abroad.

So I agree with Cllr Kerby - all businesses and individuals must comply with the national restrictions. Compliance is the quickest route for us to exit this terrible pandemic.

But sadly we know that there are a small minority of businesses and individuals who don't think the rules apply to them. Throughout the pandemic Dorset Council's regulatory officers have been following up complaints and answering business enquiries on closure and permitted safe opening. Our teams have worked alongside the Police, talking to businesses, talking to the public, working hard to ensure compliance and thus keep our residents safe.

Cllr Kerby believes that there may have been a number of unscrupulous grant claims. May I firstly reassure him that the vast majority of Dorset business owners are highly professional and act only in accordance with the formal scheme criteria and in fact many have checked directly to make sure they are acting correctly before claiming. The revenues and benefits teams in Dorset Council and Stour Valley Poole Partnership have worked tirelessly and have so far paid out grants totalling £143M to Dorset businesses.

As part of the process the applicants have to go through a strict validation process, to ensure the legitimacy of the claim. But we have taken a belt and braces approach and as part of our follow up are sharing the data with government departments, including HMRC. If there are false grant claimants out there who think you have 'got away with it' they shouldn't be surprised if they hear from us soon!

And this brings me to my final point. I can assure him that Dorset Council has a zero tolerance approach to fraud.

Thankyou

Question 2 – submitted by Cllr David Tooke

The current Local Plan Consultation strategy largely relies on people having access to, and sufficient familiarity and experience with, the internet.

Whilst there are copies lodged with local Libraries people need to be able to book, collect, read and return these in a short space of time. Given the three-week loan period it's likely that each copy will only be read by two, or at most three people, in the time available.

Many people are suffering extreme hardship and stress, many juggling home working whilst having to home educate children, many battling with grief, or loss of their livelihood. A great number of people do not have access to on-line facilities or are simply unable to engage with it. This is not the time to be conducting a "public consultation" when a large number of local residents are unable to participate.

I am sure the whole Council would prefer a fully franchised, democratic process, which would lend significant weight to the eventual published plan, rather than the democratically limited process currently in hand.

In light of this, should the Council not extend the Consultation until later in the year, when we hope to be able to have some face to face contact and the ability to run well-structured road shows, and fully involve as many of our residents as possible?

Response by Cllr David Walsh

There is nothing “democratically limited” about our current Local Plan consultation process. Simply put, we are doing more than we have ever done before to ensure that as many Dorset residents as possible, both online and offline, can engage with the process and have their say.

Around 90% of residents have internet access and are therefore fully able to take part in the consultation online. There is no requirement in legislation to make individual hard copies available. Planning regulations were amended in response to the pandemic to remove the requirement for even inspection hard copies to be available.

But, in the best interests of all our residents and to ensure no-one is excluded from taking part, we have planned for those who are not online. This includes the library copies, and we are making more copies available to those libraries where demand is greater. The libraries can also arrange delivery if people are unable to collect a copy.

While the pandemic has prevented traditional face-to-face events such as roadshows, we have worked hard to provide a range of alternatives. This includes social media advertising, online webinars that can be accessed via the telephone and watched at any time, podcasts, surgeries where people can talk to us directly and a dedicated telephone line for people who would like to speak to planning officers and discuss anything to do with the plan.

We’ve had around 50 articles in the traditional media and an article was sent to all parish and community magazines back in December to publicise the consultation. I myself have been interviewed on several local radio stations regarding the Local Plan consultation process.

This may be a different approach for those who have responded to local plan consultations previously, but we can potentially reach a much wider number of people and different audiences from those normally involved. We have already reached over a million people on social media and had around 21,500 visitors to our web pages. We have had over 3,500 viewings of our webinars, and over 600 listens of our podcasts.

Delaying the consultation would have a major impact on the programme for preparing the local plan and would be an extremely high-risk strategy. Cabinet have previously agreed that we are aiming to adopt the plan by spring 2023, and indeed a ministerial statement has recently been sent to all local planning authorities stressing the need for all to have up to date local plans by the end of 2023. All of our currently adopted local plans are more than five years old, and we do not have any parts of the council area that have both a five-year land supply and sufficient housing delivery in the last year to pass the ‘housing delivery test’.

This means that we currently have less control over the development that takes place in our area, until we can adopt an up to date plan that allocates enough land to meet our development requirements. Therefore, it is vitally important for us to avoid any delay in preparing the plan. In short, waiting for the pandemic to blow over and everything to get back to normal is simply not an option for us.

We understand that some organisations and individuals may attempt to undermine the consultation process itself as a means of protesting some of the proposals and policies outlined in the Local Plan. But I, alongside our hardworking officers on the Local Plan team, remain 100% confident that we are going above and beyond what we need to do to ensure the consultation is robust and fully accessible. In the meantime, if anyone has views on any part of the draft Local Plan, now is the time to tell us – we are listening and want to know what you think.

Question 3 – submitted by Cllr Beryl Ezzard

We have always been conservationists and conscious of reducing our carbon footprint year on year, but will our actions be fast enough? Members on this Council agreed to the Climate & Ecological Emergency in May 2019 in an urgent call to action. We need action now to slow down and reverse the current temperature rising.

Why, when other Councils nearby has, this Council has not, budgeted for Climate & Ecological emergency action in the coming year? A £100,000 at the very least, should be a priority for this Council; although we face many difficulties and trials currently, we need to focus on the objective of being carbon neutral by 2030 not by 2040.

We need to give the Dorset Community a solid commitment to quicken our pace, to reverse the trend and save our only Planet for future generations. It may mean the initial outlay is more expensive using renewal energy; solar and wind, however, within a few years, reduced heating costs and pollution will give priceless return for future generations to enjoy.

There are several budget items of lesser priority, in our opinion, that would allow for this Fund. Will the Council now act and amend the Budget Statement to include £100,000 for the Climate & Ecological Emergency action this coming year?

Thank you

Response from Cllr Ray Bryan

I was surprised to see the words We need action now to slow down and reverse the current temperature rising.

We have since May 2019 worked tirelessly to learn and understand the actions needed to reduce the carbon footprint of Dorset Council. With some amazing results already achieved.

The production of the action plan and strategy document took a number of meetings & time with officers over several months to compile the report that has recently been out to an extended public consultation the results of which are currently being analysed. Early indications show that most of the respondent's opinions are very much in line with our strategy and that includes our 2040 target date.

I said from day one that I would only support an action plan that I was confident we could achieve that includes the date.

The question is, to achieve a 2030 target date, will the local taxpayer be willing to pay a considerable increase in their current council tax which would be many millions per year over a very much shorter period. Our chosen route is to seek financial support from Central Government rather than ask our residents to fund our plans.

To obtain funding from Government they look at our Strategy and Action plan which includes dates and approve them.

The recent resident's survey shows when residents were asked to rate their views on what is important to them, out of 15 levels of importance, Climate Change came in at no 9 down two places from last year's survey.

As far as the rest of Cllr Ezzard's question is concerned this is a duplication of her suggested amendment to the budget and I would not want to pre-empt that debate.