

Cabinet of 6 April 2021

Public Questions

1. Question from Mike Allen

I am concerned about how Dorset Council intend to process the comments they have received in reply to the Draft Local Plan Consultation.

In particular, it is important that members of the public are able to see the full range of comments without undue hindrance, but DC's Statement of Community Involvement has only this to say:

"All comments received in response to a consultation will be considered. A consultation report summarising comments and a response to the issues raised will be made available on the Local Plan web pages."

A summary alone will not enable the public to see all the comments, nor will a list of them suffice, because there will be so many. I suggest they ought to be stored in a **searchable online database** (a spreadsheet for instance) so that anyone can see easily what others have said about each policy or paragraph in the Plan. Collating the responses in this way will lead to observers being able to relate meaningfully the Council's response to those comments to the comments themselves.

With this in mind I would like to ask a question please of the Cabinet regarding the involvement of local communities in drafting the Local Plan:

Question:

If the Council do not store the comments received about each policy and paragraph in a searchable database accessible to the public, how can the public be certain that the Council's responses have taken reasonable regard of all the comments received?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning

We will be publishing all of the responses received, in a searchable database as suggested, though this will not be immediately available as we need to input all the responses, redact personal information and check for any potentially offensive material. We will also, later on, publish a summary of the comments with responses to all the main issues raised, as stated in the Statement of Community Involvement.

2. Question from William Kenealy

1. Why has the portfolio holder made repeated political statements to the press and still not replied individually to the questions and over 20 e-mails sent in to the October cabinet meeting by residents, local organisations and the Parish Council in respect of works in Dinah's Hollow as stated in the meeting minutes?

2. Why has the portfolio holder ignored requests to meet the Parish Council and residents to address their concerns about the proposed Dinah's Hollow works and the poor traffic management in the village?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment

The Portfolio Holder was asked by Dorset Council Communication team for a statement, which was part of a press release regarding Dinah's Hollow Project. The purpose of the press release was to make Local Parish Councils and members of the public aware the project was going to be included in the next Cabinet meeting on 6th April 2021.

The emails Mr Kenealy refers to would be related to the Cabinet Meeting on 6th October 2020. Unfortunately, only 2 questions from Linda Nunn, Director, Cranborne Chase AONB and Mr Richard Burden were received before the deadline for submission and therefore they were the only 2 questions included to the pre questions list. Any remaining emails with comments or questions regarding Dinah's Hollow project were received too late for submission. An acknowledgment receipt was sent, advising them that the deadline had past and that their question/statement will not be heard as part of the meeting.

However, officers did reply to the emails that were forwarded to them. If any responses are outstanding, please resend the emails and answers will be given.

[There will be a link available in the written response that gives information as to how a member of public can get involved in the committee meeting.](#)

I received a request from Cllr Jane Somper in August 2020 for a meeting with a number of Parish Councils.

Having searched my email's I cannot find any other requests. Could the writer of the question please give me details of requests?

I asked officers for a review of Dorset Council position at that time on risk and liabilities.

I have been waiting for papers to come to Cabinet for approval.

The work now begins subject to Cabinet approval and as soon as I am out of lockdown will be happy to meet with interested parties to discuss plans and options.

We need to deal with Dinah's Hollow.

3. Question from Mary Calvert

1. The piecemeal use of consultants with a Finance rather than a need led assessment has resulted in hasty proposals that are likely to prove unwise and unrealistic in the long run. In particular, it is doubtful that South Walks House will attract a developer with 30% affordable housing in one building. It would seem advisable to keep the option of a hotel on the table since the Council has already been approached.

Will the Council commit to 30% affordable housing in South Walks House even if this may make the development uneconomic for a developer; and has the Council got a plan B?

2. Dorset Councils (past and present) have failed over decades to ensure the provision of disabled access at either station in Dorchester. It is therefore essential that access is given sufficient attention as part of the current rationalisation and consolidation exercise. This is particularly relevant at the County Hall/Colliton Park site which is to be a “public service civic hub” having due regard to the Equality Act 2010.

Which community interest company established by disabled people, older people and carers is the Dorset Council commissioning to undertake the fresh series of Access Audits (as reported to the Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee), what are the terms of reference of the Access Audits and how can Dorchester residents get involved?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth, Assets and Property

Question 1

In November 2020 the Cabinet endorsed the Property Strategy & Asset Management Plan. The strategy set out that unless there was little or no benefit associated with redevelopment the Council should undertake a viability assessment and at that point prior to making a decision either to dispose or redevelop an asset will decide whether to seek outline or full planning permission. The adoption of such an approach would allow the Council to exert greater influence over a development in terms of timescales, tenure, affordable content and environmental impact.

The allocation of affordable housing within development is governed by Dorset Council’s policy. Any schemes brought forward will be compliant with those policies, including the affordable housing component. We are confident that viable schemes are available for the site including the affordable component.

Throughout the timescales associated with obtaining the necessary planning consent for residential conversion we are intending to continue to further investigate all options with regard to the site (including that of a hotel) in order to ensure that we achieve the best commercial, social and economic outcome before bringing a final recommendation to Cabinet for approval with regard to future use.

Question 2

The Council currently complies with the 2010 Equality Act and has met all reasonable requirements in accordance with the legislation.

As per the response provided to a similar question raised prior to the Place & Resources Scrutiny Committee and as detailed within the draft EqIA as provided at Appendix 1 of the Cabinet report the Council has commissioned DOTS Disability to

undertake a further programme of independent access audits on its behalf. DOTS is a community interest company and is the social enterprise arm of the charity Access Dorset. They have previously undertaken work for Dorset Council, BCP, NHS Dorset, Aster and Magna Housing amongst others.

The Access Audit will provide an assessment of a building against best practice standards in order to benchmark its accessibility to disabled people. The Audit will assess what actions are necessary and reasonable for the Council to undertake as required by the Equality Act 2010 setting out clear recommendations and priority ratings in order for the Council to plan and budget for any necessary adjustive works.

We would expect the audits to cover all elements of our buildings and its environment following the 'journey' of a disabled user and typically will cover:-

- Approach and car parking
- Entrances
- Receptions
- Horizontal circulation-corridors
- Lifts and stairs
- Internal doors
- Toilets
- Signage and wayfinding
- Communication
- Means of escape for disabled people

There are usually many other site specific elements which will arise and be covered as part of an audit.

Dorchester residents are involved everyday through using our buildings and facilities and as such can comment or complain about any particular aspect whereby they feel that the Council is not complying with or failing to meet the legislation. As a Council we are duty bound to investigate any such complaint, respond accordingly and where necessary make reasonable adjustments.

Through the twin track approach of proactive auditing and resident/customer interaction the Council can ensure it has taken all reasonable steps to meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

4. Question from John Calvert

As a Dorchester resident I am concerned at the detrimental effects on location of staff, resulting location of services and access to those services of the recommendations in the Dorset Office Strategy report in item 14.

I note that the report is provided by the Director of Property and Assets and was initially sent to the Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee. It is not then surprising that the implications are given as Finance, then Climate then other. It was admitted at that meeting that the actual numbers and location of staff was fluid. However counting numbers of desks was seen as key to the recommendations.

Where is located Dorset Council's vision for the services needed by its residents and visitors and the organisation of staff to provide those services? Shouldn't that come first before a narrow accounting examination of office space?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Customer and Community Services

The covid pandemic has brought about many changes to our way of working and we hope to keep the positive ideas moving forward. We know that there are some occasions when it is important that members of the public meet with us on a face to face basis. We want to support the public by trying to ensure that their queries are resolved at the first point of contact. We are looking to build this into our customer access strategy which we are progressing.

Within Dorchester the Council is proposing to relocate its customer service access point, supported by customer services staff into our library and learning centre which will remain located at the west end of the South Walks House building. Access to all services are already available within the library space through free access to library computers and Wi-Fi. Our future provision will include support for customers to access council services digitally, as well as in person, through a general enquiry helpdesk. We are also planning for the provision of confidential and semi-confidential spaces to discuss sensitive matters preferably with an appointment.

Our digital vision for Dorset Council is included in our cabinet papers which provides a strategy and plan for improving our digital offer and supporting residents to go online. Our recent resident survey provided data that tells us that over 86% of residents use the internet for accessing services and 37% of residents prefer to use the telephone to contact the Council. Our vision is for Dorset Council to be a digital council, supported by essential access to telephone services. Our 'in person' services will be delivered within trusted community spaces, for example, our libraries.

One certainty in the future provision of services is that they will continue to change, forever. There is no point at which the future will be known and planned. We must progress on the numerous decisions we make with the knowledge we have at that point.

5. Question from Pete West Secretary Dorset Community Energy

The council clearly understands the importance of reducing net CO2 emissions to zero as quickly as possible through your declaration of a Climate and Ecological Climate in 2019. The only realistic way to achieve this for Dorset as a whole is through an offshore wind power scheme on the scale of the previously proposed Navitus Bay project, which would decarbonise the total electricity consumption of Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole at no cost to the council and create hundreds of new local jobs. However there was almost no mention of offshore wind Power in Dorset Council's recent Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy document.

Does the council recognise the importance of an offshore wind scheme to meeting Dorset's targets for net emissions and that public opinion has changed a lot since the previous Navitus Bay scheme was rejected ? Would the council be prepared to

support a new proposal for an offshore wind farm sited 9-18 miles off the coast of Dorset ?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment

The Dorset Council climate and economical emergency strategy (pg 25-26) highlights the challenges and opportunities for renewable energy in the County. It notes the need for large Giga Watt scale renewable energy deployment to achieve the 8 fold increase in renewable energy capacity required to meet the energy needs of the whole County.

Dorset Council cannot deploy the Giga Watts of renewable energy required at this scale and does not have control of national planning policy or economics of renewable energy. Any future proposal that was to come forward for a large scale off shore wind project would be a planning matter decide by the Secretary of State due to its national significance and Dorset Council would only be one of many statutory consultees to the planning application.

However, in recognition of the role such a project could play in helping Dorset meet its Carbon Neutral ambitions the strategy identifies a specific action to lobby government over the major hurdles for renewable energy deployment, the Navitus Bay decision and grid infrastructure.

6. Question from Helen Sumler

The CEE Strategy Making it Happen Section, under Engagement and Communications, states "Through our initial call for ideas, Dorset residents told us they wanted Dorset Council to help with understanding climate change and the steps that can be taken to tackle it", and in addition, at the recent CEE Strategy Consultation People's Assemblies, one of the consistent themes from the public was a request for information about action to take to address climate change. With this in mind, will Dorset Council fund the Sustainable Dorset Green Living Project, (<https://www.sustainabledorset.org/discover-greener-living/>) for 2021, to continue to give households the tools and information, in the form of the project work books, to help them minimise their carbon footprint?

For those households who prefer an online interactive tool, will Dorset Council investigate if Giki Zero (GIKI = Get Informed, Know your Impact, <https://zero.giki.earth>), as used by Norfolk Association of Local Councils as part of their Well-Being initiative, might provide guidance on steps to tackle climate change and if so whether, in order to explore the Dorset County footprint beyond the data provided by Central Government, the Council would consider funding the Giki Zero Pro version for all interested households on a trial basis?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment

The Making it Happen section of the climate and ecological strategy (pgs 57-60) highlights the need to improve awareness and engagement of staff and the public on

the issues of climate change and behavior change and sets out a number of methods the Council will be employing to do this.

As part of the ongoing development of a wider communication strategy we will be exploring the range of online tools, such as Giki Zero, as well as opportunities for working more closely with range of partners to engage and communicate with residents.

7. Question Professor Michael Dower and the Dorset Climate Action Network (DCAN)

The draft Local Plan proposes to provide land for more than 39,000 new houses between now and 2038. This number is based on use of the Government's 'Standard Method' for assessing housing, and includes about 9,000 houses to meet unmet need which may be requested by neighbouring authorities. Councillor David Walsh has stated that the Standard Method is "set in stone by the government" and cannot be altered; and that any challenge to that method would fail because the draft Local Plan shows that sites can be found for that large number of houses.

What Councillor Walsh did not mention is :

1. The only way that sites for more than about 20,000 houses can be found is by making large encroachment on the AONB, breaching the Green Belt and using large areas of greenfield land, all of which are against government policy.
2. The Sustainability Assessment in the Local Plan shows that almost all new sites proposed for housing or workspace would, if developed, cause grave damage to landscape and to biodiversity and would gravely impede the Council's own Climate Strategy to cut greenhouse gas emissions.
3. The Government's National Planning Policy Framework states very plainly (paragraph 60) that the standard method is not 'set in stone'; and that a planning authority can use a different method if "exceptional circumstances" apply.
4. The Local Plan provides ample evidence, in Section 1, to justify a claim of 'exceptional circumstances' based on the uniquely rich heritage of the county in landscape, natural habitats, heritage coast and historic towns; the exceptional overlapping density of global, European, national and local designations which protect that heritage; the Green Belt on the west side of BCP conurbation; and traffic congestion & pressures on infrastructure in Central & South East Dorset.
5. Government guidance also clearly states that calculations of housing need should not be used to justify building houses on greenfield sites in the AONB or the Green Belt (National Planning Policy Framework paras 136-137).
6. There is no obligation on Dorset Council to meet unmet need for housing from a neighbouring authority. The 'duty to co-operate' on this was withdrawn in 2018. Moreover, no neighbouring authority has submitted such a request.
7. The Council's main duty is to ensure that local needs for housing, including truly affordable homes, can be met. This points towards a total of about 20,000 new homes over the 17 year period, which can be accommodated without the damage that we describe.

In view of these points, will the Council think again, cut its new homes target from 39,000 to 20,000, and save the county from the impact of a serious and un-necessary over-estimate of housing need?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning

The council will consider all the consultation responses received, before making any decisions about what should be included in the next stage of the plan.

The National Planning Policy Framework requires councils to use the standard methodology for identifying local housing need, unless exceptional circumstances justify an alternative approach which also reflect current and future demographic trends and market signals. We cannot therefore plan only for 'local need' and currently do not believe that there are exceptional circumstances to justify an alternative approach, though we will of course consider the matter during our assessment of all the consultation responses. Whether that need (including any unmet need from neighbouring areas) can be met within the environmental constraints of the plan area is a different matter, which will also be considered carefully.

It is not the case that the 'duty to cooperate' in relation to housing numbers from adjoining areas has been withdrawn. The latest, 2019 version of the National Planning Policy Framework says in paragraph 60 that 'in addition to the local housing need figure, any needs that cannot be met in neighbouring areas should also be taken into account in establishing the amount of housing to be planned for'.

In relation to requests from other authorities, the consultation response from BCP Council states that they have a significant and challenging housing requirement, though they have not yet quantified the extent to which they will be unable to meet it. They refer to the need for continued dialogue with Dorset Council on this key strategic matter, and for the Statement of Common Ground between the two councils to consider the distribution of housing need across the wider area.

8. Question from Dr Sandra Reeve

Capital Programme 2021/2022 report

Paragraph 10.2, in the background to recommendations, makes clear that the Capital Strategy & Asset Management Group does not require bids to meet any specific environmental standards.

Within the current evaluation framework 'Clear Environmental Benefit' is just one of seven criteria that can be selected for any particular bid. A bid only needs to satisfy one criterion, which means that proposals can be environmentally unsound.

In the light of the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) declared by Dorset Council, does Cabinet agree that *all* bids for funding should be required to meet this 'Clear Environmental Benefit' criterion?

Response from the Portfolio Holder from Finance, Commercial and Capital Strategy

No. Dorset Council allocates capital spending in many different areas ranging from IT to highways, from Harbour dredging through to household recycling centres. This means that every scheme has to be assessed on its individual merits. Whilst we would not be looking to invest in environmentally unsound projects, there may be occasions where essential capital spend is required that does not have a clear environmental benefit.