

**Full Council
15 July 2021**

**Public Participation Period
Questions and Responses**

Question 1 – submitted by Toby Branston

Dorset Council has signed up to addressing the Climate and Ecological Emergency. Therefore can they answer why they are prepared to put over 800 houses on organically farmed fields in Wool with high levels of biodiversity including at least 10 priority species of birds such as cornbunting and yellowhammer plus brown hares. For reference; ‘priority species’ are those that were identified as being the most threatened and requiring conservation action under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP). The identified fields are important for several priority species of bat (all species are protected) which feed nightly on the abundant insect population of over 300 recorded species. These fields are also the most diverse botanically in the area due to being managed organically and sympathetically for wildlife.

Response by Cllr David Walsh

Like all councils, we are required to meet our area’s housing needs as well as addressing the climate and ecological emergency. Environmental constraints are very important considerations in decisions about the most appropriate sites for development. We have consulted on a range of potential development sites and will be considering all the responses carefully before making any decisions about the sites and policies to be included in the next stage of plan preparation.

Question 2 & 3 – submitted by Russell Todd

The Broad Oak Residents Association (BORA) has recently been involved with a planning application and, as a result of engaging in the planning process we believe that it is unfair and lacks rigour:

It is not particularly clear how the process works and now having taken part, it would appear that the process is obliging the objector to second guess what the applicant might say in response to your objection. This has the result of making your objection overly long and potentially unclear.

Question 1: The planning process does not automatically notify neighbours that an application is starting or ongoing and if the applicant fails to put up a notice to find out what is going on you have to constantly refer to the Dorset Council (DC) website. Not everybody uses the internet and it can be difficult to find planning applications that are relevant for your immediate area.

I would have thought that DC has a duty to inform those with neighbouring properties or has a process of notification that allows for those who do not have access to the internet or do not use it.

Question 2: When an applicant makes a statement why does DC not require

evidence to support that statement? Most people keep records of business or receipts for other purposes and it would not be hard to add this to an application.

There does not seem to be an overarching view of individual planning applications and how that affects what is going on beyond an individual application. A series of individual applications in a small area can have significant impacts on roads and services, but this is not accounted for in the current process.

BORA request that the committee review the planning application process to create a fairer system that has some rigour to it, so that all parties involved in an application can have some confidence that a fair decision has been arrived at and that the process is not leaning one way.

Response by Cllr David Walsh

Dorset Council sets out its consultation commitments in the adopted Statement of Community Involvement. All applications are publicised via site notices which allows neighbours and other local residents to be alerted to planning applications in their area, including residents who do not have access to the internet. We also publish details on our website which, for the vast majority of Dorset residents, provides a convenient means of looking at all plans and documents submitted with the application.

All planning applications must be considered on their individual merits and must be determined in accordance with relevant development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The development plan sets out the strategy, generic policies and site specific allocations for the area.

Statements by an applicant are only one part of an application. Local Planning Authorities set out mandatory and local requirements for documents and evidence that are required to enable the determination of an application. We cannot control what an applicant says in a statement but the details that form the planning application are assessed against national and local plan policies, having regard to the representations and consultation responses that are received.

Question 4 – submitted by Helen Sumbler

With regard to the Community Governance Review of Parishes in the Dorset Council area:

What is the background behind this / the urgency to undertake the governance review at this particular time, when we are still in the midst of the Covid pandemic, the impact of Brexit is still unknown and there are so many other pressing matters that require council officer resources; and also bearing in mind that any recommendations would not take effect until 2024, 2 years after the Order is made?

Response by Cllr Spencer Flower

A Community Governance Review has not been undertaken for many years by some of Dorset Council's predecessor councils, and we have received requests from a number of parishes for a review of their boundaries. Rather than undertaking piecemeal reviews, it is considered more appropriate to consider governance arrangements across the area as a whole. As any changes can only be implemented at scheduled elections, to delay this piece of work could risk any changes not taking effect until 2029.

Question 5 – submitted by Helen Sumbler

With regard to the Community Governance Review of Parishes in the Dorset Council area:

As part of the review process, will Dorset Council be proposing any changes, or will the only change proposals to be developed into recommendations be those as a result of submissions / representations received from the parties consulted?

Response by Cllr Spencer Flower

Primarily, Dorset Council will be interested in considering submissions made by local residents, councils and other interested parties. However, there may be areas where eg electoral inequality is not achieved but no submissions are made by interested parties. In this case, Dorset Councillors will be asked to consider changes to ensure that the principles of good community governance are achieved.

Statement – submitted by John Grantham

Item 14 tonight gives the opportunity for ANOTHER Council to move to REAL democracy..... FROM a position where the Leader of any biggest party, (voted in on just 39.3% of votes), is able to hand-pick from just one party, the 10 councillors, assisted by Lead Members, to comprise the Cabinet, which effectively then determines policy.

When "Public First Group" planned to achieve a Committee system for West Dorset District Council in 2015, an essential step was Research. In Sherborne over 2 days we interviewed 306 people at our stand, discussing the merits of Cabinet v Committee. Before we started an official-looking gentleman said "Everyone wants the Cabinet system!"

Not so! The research found less than 50% even knew there WAS a 'WDDC' and a 'DCC'. Under 10% knew there was a Cabinet system operating. And of the 306 respondents ...301 opted for the Committee system,.... most scarcely believing the archaic nature of the Cabinet system.

That was when we KNEW we'd win a referendum. We circulated 2000 notes to Dorchester homes mid-week, describing the two systems, saying we had a "signing-stand" in South St on Saturday. NO LESS THAN 800 people came out and signed!! They knew the Cabinet system had protected new council offices being built, despite

Dorchester's Town Referendum where 93% had voted against. The build simultaneously obliterated a 226-bay central public-car-park in Dorchester. Among councils converting, using the 2011 Localism Act, were **Fylde**, then **Canterbury**, (where the leading party converted VOLUNTARILY, seeing the hordes of public, signing). By converting VOLUNTARILY they SAVED THE COUNCIL AND TAX-PAYER from referendum costs. **West Dorset** then voted by a landslide for the Committee system. Recently **Cheshire East**, whose Cabinet was judged to have acted highly partially, converted; and at **Sheffield City Council**, Labour's Cabinet system was able to protect its policy of chopping down thousands of trees on Council property, only stopped by public clamour and the Law at 5,400 fellings; leading to a landslide referendum vote FOR the Committee system.

PREDICTION: Hopefully the Council will vote tonight for the Committee system: with the public now meeting again, and with social media, the public WILL get to know the facts. If it's voted down tonight, but all the unfairly squeezed parties make the Committee system their no. 1 election promise at the next Council elections, they will undoubtedly take control of the Council and introduce the Committee system. There couldn't be a better time to implement the 'Committee' system, especially with a dozen WDDC councillors having worked it already, and staff-members who implemented its introduction. Congratulations if you can introduce this **non-party-political** PROCESS in May 2022 to turbo-charge your productivity!

Question 6 – submitted by John Grantham

Tonight there will of course be a vote on the possible introduction of the 'Committee' system into Dorset Council. There is of course experience of a public vote on this issue from the old West Dorset District Council, where a landslide vote by the electorate in favour of the Committee system occurred in 2016.

I hope tonight all are able to defuse the '**party-political**' angle to this issue. This is a vote purely on 'process', not 'politics', and it allows the council the opportunity to show its credentials in terms of its belief in **fairly and proportionately reflecting** the electorate's votes as they've cast them.

I believe Dorset Council could reasonably easily move into the Committee process by May 2022, and that its standing would be strongly and authoritatively enhanced.

I have voted many ways in my life but have concluded that a fair and just **system** is the vital determinant of the Democracy this country holds in trust.

As you can probably imagine, in the landslide referendum win in 2016 in West Dorset, there were many, many voters from the ruling party who voted for the Committee system, (I estimate several thousands), seeing it as 'just' and the 'right thing to do'. In fact the vote was not about politics, but about process.

In 2015 a councillor from the minority Conservative party in Reading, Berks, approached our stand saying they really hoped we'd get the Committee system. They said that as a result of that Council having 'gone Committee' they now went to the Council meetings with hope and relish, sitting as a minority party councillor WITH the other parties in Committee, instead of apart, and not looking to see where there were weaknesses in their arguments. Instead they were at last able to use their collective brain-power to contribute, to look at and discuss together how they could crack critical issues on Children's Education, Social Services or the Housing Build programme.

My Question therefore is: At this late stage I would be interested to learn – if it is possible to say – if Councillors have your support in reassessing all they learn from

this evening and coming to their individual conclusions, and that you will promote the issue as a completely non-party-political 'free vote' on whether to introduce the Committee system in May 2022?

Response by Cllr Spencer Flower

We are just coming out of the worst global crisis for 100 years. Covid-19 will have long lasting consequences for the individuals and communities which make up Dorset. The pandemic has left this council with significant additional burdens and financial pressures and has caused disruption to our planned transformation programme. Any eight councillors can require an item to be debated at a meeting of the Full Council but choosing now to force a debate about the Council's internal rules and how we organise ourselves and make decisions seems self indulgent. Having to completely re-write our internal rule book will only serve to divert councillors and council staff away from what should be our top priorities; to ensure Dorset recovers well from the pandemic and to modernise how we provide council services. Focusing instead on our own internal rules makes us look out of touch with reality and would have a serious negative impact on our commitment to always put the interests of our communities first. This is not the time to debate the merits or otherwise of the changes set out in the Motion. The risks I have outlined are just far too great. My view is that this sort of change to how the council organises itself should be considered immediately following elections, not halfway through a term of office.

Question 7 – submitted by Dr Sandra Reeve

CEE Strategy documents - Appendix B

In Appendix B, it is noticeable that, apart from the targets, the only other section where the EAP is mentioned is in the Leadership and Governance section. In item 1, subject area "Ensure strong partnership set-up/over- sight, collaboration and 'bottom-up approach through community involvement (TPCs, young people, assemblies)" the comment in the Recommendation column is "Assemblies – EAP ruled out."

The assemblies that community groups ran to raise public awareness and increase the engagement with the recent Dorset Council CEE Strategy and Dorset Council Local Plan consultations were met with positive responses from the public. Surely the use of similar facilitated public assemblies (also known as peoples' assemblies, community assemblies and community conversations), that provide an opportunity for all participants to speak in a non-threatening, small group situation, could provide an additional means of engaging with the public about the CEE Strategy and Action Plans.

Could the Council please explain why the use of this form of public engagement has been ruled out?

Response by Cllr Ray Bryan

The Council is committed to communicating and engaging with key stakeholders, organisations, groups and individuals in order to support the journey to a Zero-Carbon County and the making it happen section of the strategy sets out some of the initial actions we plan to take. The emphasis has been on community engagement using existing established groups and forums. The EAP had concerns about the behaviours, actions and motivations of some involved in promoting the assembly approach, and this is something the council can keep under review.

We have begun this process through the development of the strategy but recognise this is just the start and there is a great deal to do. Our future approach to communications and engagement is being developed to support the strategy and we will aim to use a range of communication tools and methods across the services provided by the Council to enable wider engagement and partnership working, to raise awareness, encourage behaviour change.

Questions 8 & 9 – submitted by Giles Watts

Monitoring Emissions in Dorset.

The Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy states baseline emissions data for Dorset both for direct emissions by Dorset Council and emissions for the whole of Dorset. The origin for these baseline emissions is not clear. Neither is it clear how future emissions will be monitored both in terms of frequency and detail. Tracking emissions accurately is fundamental to being able to identify successes and failures in the strategy and so drive emissions down and meet our targets.

Question: Please can Dorset Council state the origin of the emissions data quoted in the Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy Document and state how often and in what detail they propose to monitor future county-wide emissions in Dorset.

Response by Cllr Ray Bryan

The carbon emission figures from 'Dorset Council' are calculated using national Green House Gas conversion factors provided by the Department for Business, Energy and Industry Strategy - Green House gas reporting: conversion factors. These are updated annually and allow us to convert our energy use (kilowatt hours), vehicle fuel (litres petrol/diesel), staff travel (mileage) and our waste (kilograms) from all our operations into Carbon Emission equivalents. The carbon figures reported for 'Dorset County Area' are provided centrally by the Department for Business, Energy and Industry Strategy – Emissions of carbon dioxide for Local Authority areas.

Both of these sets of data will be monitored and progress reported to the public annually, this will be reported at the same level of detail provided in the Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy, within a wider progress report.