

Full Council
14 December 2021
Questions from Councillors

Question 1 submitted by Cllr Louie O'Leary

Her Majesty the Queen ascended to the throne in nineteen hundred and fifty-two. She is this country's longest serving head of state in history, she is defender of the faith and head of the commonwealth of nations. She is a symbol of public service and we all should be very proud of her and all her years of service to this nation. In the year of her jubilee we as a council should reaffirm our support and admiration of her as the principal elected authority of her people in Dorset by beginning each full council and annual council meeting by singing the first verse of the national anthem "God Save the Queen".

Response by Cllr Val Potheary

Thank you for your question Cllr O'Leary, about a matter which is very close to my heart. There is no doubt about the amazing and unstinting service that Her Majesty has given to her country, and we will of course have the opportunity to show our love and respect for Her during the Platinum Jubilee celebrations.

However, I feel that a decision regarding this request should be democratically made, and therefore I commit to polling all of our members – in the same way as I did regarding the views on an opening prayer. I will ensure that an email will be circulated in the New Year to ascertain the majority view, going forward.

Thank you again for your question.

Question 2 submitted by Cllr Nick Ireland

Back in the early noughties, Dorset County Council entered into block contracts with Care South which include care homes such as Buxton House, Maiden Castle and Fairlawn. The contract wasn't tendered, ends in 2040 with no review until 2039, and we pay for beds regardless of whether they are occupied or not.

Neither the contracts nor the costs are confidential - the information on them is easily found in the public domain such as NHS Digital, EU Contracts and the provider's own website. One such example can be found at <https://procontract.due-north.com/ContractsRegister/ViewContractDetails?contractId=6599c380-1a95-e511-8105-000c29c9ba21>

A recent incident where a resident at one of the care homes moved (due to a change in personal circumstances) from being paid for by Dorset Council to a self-funder highlighted that the weekly cost was considerably higher than at other comparable care homes not under this block contract. The outcome was that the resident relocated and DC eventually refunded the difference. DC also agreed to notify anyone else whose circumstances changed in a similar manner that they were paying over the odds but have refused to do this retrospectively i.e. anyone similarly overcharged in the past will be none the wiser. It seems grossly unfair that those who have potentially lost thousands of pounds through no fault of their own but as a result of this council's inflexible contracts will neither be notified nor compensated.

In addition, the continuing use of these contracts exacerbates the cost pressures on our Adult Services; one estimate is that the ongoing excessive cost is approximately £42k per week (£2.2m/year!). It is interesting to note that these contracts aren't highlighted in our budget papers nor mentioned as a potential area where we can make savings (yet we quote possible savings of £350k in the Dorset Care Framework). For example a recent care sufficiency report to People & Health Scrutiny gave an example of a service user moved into residential care at a cost of £850/week; If the service user had been placed in one of the block contract care homes, that cost would have been over £1200/week.

Given that the contracts still have nearly 20 years to run, what is Dorset Council intending to do to regarding the continued waste of our council taxpayers money on them?

Response by Cllr Peter Wharf

In the early 1990s Dorset County Council established a charity, then called the Dorset Trust and now Care South. The County Council granted leases of 18 council run care homes to the charity and transferred the staff and running of the homes to the charity. Doing so enabled the charity to benefit from central government payments not available to council run homes and reduced significantly the cost to council taxpayers of funding places in these care homes.

Some of the care homes did not meet modern legal standards and by the early 2000s required major investment from the County Council as freehold owner of the homes. Rather than find the immediate cost of replacing these care homes the County Council between 2003 and 2007 entered into three contract under which in return for Care South replacing homes the County Council entered into long term agreements to block purchase beds in the homes. These arrangements benefitted service users and the County Council by providing certainty about the availability of places in modern homes that met required standards and benefitted Care South by providing a definite income stream that enabled them to make long term funding commitments to pay for construction of the new homes.

Few members before today will have been aware of the history that I have outlined. Knowing that history I do not believe that we can simply dismiss the contracts as a waste of our council taxpayer's money.

Our predecessor Councils, whether the five districts or the County Council, made a range of decisions that we might now prefer that they had not made. As Dorset Council we now need to be much more commercial in our approach than our predecessor councils ever were. We are reviewing the contract and these discussions are highly complex. I will be happy to update the People and Health Scrutiny Committee on progress.

Question 3 submitted by Cllr J Orrell

We face a new wave of COVID. I am keen to know the situation for adult social care. We hear of care homes losing workers who are unimmunised, gone due to Brexit or attracted to better pay in other sectors. The NHS has been closing hospital beds on the mantra of care closer to home over the last decade. The recent new settlement for lifetime costs seems to have been consumed largely to backfill NHS under investment leaving a smaller share for social care. Does Dorset adult social care have capacity in people and money to pick up the strain of the coming Omicron wave?

Response by Cllr Peter Wharf

97% of colleagues working in care homes in Dorset have been double vaccinated. There are a variety of reasons why the small percentage of colleagues (3%) haven't been vaccinated to date and this will include a number of people who are not clinically able to receive the vaccine.

There are recruitment and retention pressures on the whole care sector and that is reported nationally. It is correct that other sectors are attracting staff because of competitive salaries which the care sector is not always able to match and this is also highlighted as a national issue. We are working with local providers to find ways to help recruit and retain staff in the sector and we distribute the additional Government grants to providers, to help with this as swiftly as we can. In addition, we have agreed reduced car parking charges for carers in order to help and provide an incentive.

We are also working with health colleagues and with the region to see what more can be done and are promoting the national 'Made with Care' Campaign with providers. This is a new social care recruitment campaign launched in England in November. We have submitted workforce returns to the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services along with three quarters of other LAs across the county requesting that increased recurrent funding is required to enable parity between NHS and social care roles and that care workers are added to the Shortage Occupation List and the salary threshold for immigration be reduced – this is then shared with Government.

We would welcome any ideas Cllrs have in terms of promoting careers in social care.

We are in a winter period and still dealing with lots of infection in the community caused by delta and of course are taking additional national measures as a precautionary approach to the newly identified omicron variant.

It is important to note the progress with the vaccination programme, not just progress in relation to aforementioned care home staff, but the whole population and the commitment to an acceleration of the booster programme over the next few weeks. It is also incumbent upon us to action the extra public health measures like working from home, wearing masks in indoor settings, avoiding unnecessary mixing and taking care to test regularly before going into higher risk settings as these actions will all help reduce the risk of transmission.

Finally, note the Public Health team continue to work very closely with colleagues in the adult social care sector, and other higher risk settings to identify, test, isolate and support organisations with effective infection prevention and control measures, as they have been doing since the start of the pandemic. The team have gained lots of experience in responding to these outbreaks and deploying local public health measures funded through additional monies such as the Contain Outbreak Management Fund. They have recently agreed to extend local contact tracing and targeted testing services, acknowledging that Dorset are possibly heading into a further wave so we can continue to provide an effective response. In terms of the specific impact of the new variant, it really is still too early to tell, but again, with the help of additional national measures we are taking action to try to reduce the impact and spread as quickly as possible.