

Question to Cabinet 1 March 2022

Question 1 from Cllr Kelly Webb, Chairman & Town Mayor, Wimborne Minster Town Council

WMTC has written to DC with a number of specific questions, firstly on 5th November last year. Some were answered, but some were not. Many answers – as in this report - simply state that the final outcomes will only be known when QE School decide how they will operate once the agreement ends in 2 years' time. It is disappointing that although EDDC worked with a local school for the benefit of the wider community by supporting a shared facility, DC appears to only be considering the financial savings involved in changing the arrangement.

The Risk Assessments in the report give no consideration as to what could happen to the facility after DC's involvement ends and this is disappointing. QE School could decide to reduce access to the public or remove it altogether, they may need to close some parts of the building to both the public and students as they are unable to meet the cost of operating or maintaining them. The report before you today seeks to disassociate DC with anything that may or may not happen regarding the QELC facilities and buildings after such time as the agreement ends. This feels morally wrong.

Can you confirm the total annual operating costs for the QELC broken down into component parts as to which organisation contributes what amounts? The Trust has advised that the 40% of operating costs that they are liable for, are covered by the £280k of the 'Exceptional Funding Factor' award (making 100% approximately £700k). It therefore does not make sense that DC are estimating 550k pa savings (where the contribution has been advised as 60%) – as that figure would represent approximately 80% of the operating costs if £280k is indeed 40%. The reason for asking is that the recommendation to withdraw from the agreement may not be 'sound' if the projected savings are incorrect.

Response of the Portfolio Holder for Customer and Community Services

Thank you for your question. If the Council chose to withdraw from the management agreement, then it will be for the School's Foundation Trustees, as the building and landowner, to decide how the facilities are managed in the future. We have however made it clear in the report that the school are committed to retaining leisure facilities for school and community use and we would continue to support them through any transitional period.

The £280k Exceptional Factor Funding contribution covers revenue costs attributable to the schools use of the leisure centre and a 40% contribution towards ongoing capital costs. The school does not contribute 40% of the total costs as much of this relates to community usage. The figure of £550k is the budgeted cost to Dorset Councils Leisure Services.

Question 2 from Cllr Kelly Webb, Chairman & Town Mayor, Wimborne Minster Town Council

In the context of this questions, WMTC maintains all its own playparks within its boundary and its recreation grounds. There are current moves to transfer additional assets of open spaces to WMTC ownership which will increase the maintenance burden. WMTC has no significant income-generating assets and has a relatively low tax base with which to support a market town serving a much wider area than its own population.

My second question;

Whilst much of the proposal to withdraw from the agreement is based around savings and other similar recreational facilities in the area, what consideration has been given to the fair distribution of DC's spend on all types of recreational facilities throughout Dorset - and the Town & Parish Councils' ability to afford to invest in such facilities themselves? There appears to be a huge disparity in the Unitary Authority's investment in recreation across Dorset and also the ability of T&P Councils to generate income. For example, some have access to car park income and others rely solely on their precepts. It may well be that DC are investing more heavily in QELC than other similar leisure facilities, but comparisons need to be made at a higher level i.e. DC's spend on all recreational facilities across Dorset, including open spaces, playparks and beaches to ensure a fair spread of funding and that comparisons are made with income generation abilities at a local level.

Response of the Portfolio Holder for Customer and Community Services

Thank you again for your question. The report details the high number of other leisure centres close to QE Leisure Centre, 3 of which are Dorset Council facilities. We have also highlighted the wonderful country parks that Dorset Council operates close by and the high levels of investment in the East Dorset area. I would also point out that there will be further very positive recreational improvements to the area with two 3G artificial pitches and additional play parks and suitable alternative natural greenspace related to local housing development.

A Strategic Leisure Review is underway that will focus on all aspects of leisure provision, and not just the built facilities. Moving forward, this will enable us to work towards a more equitable provision of facilities to support sport, leisure and recreational activities across the whole Dorset Council area and provide opportunities for all residents to be active.

Question 3 from Ross Bowell

Following the meeting of the Council's Place and Resources Overview Committee on 10 February, with deep regret we see that it is very likely that at the meeting of 1 March Cabinet will approve a proposal for the Council to withdraw from the dual use agreement at Queen Elizabeth's Leisure Centre.

Much was made in the meeting of the Council's offer of support in putting the centre on a sustainable footing going forward, but there was very little detail as to how the

Council (which is currently running the centre at a significant financial loss) will be able to meaningfully provide such support.

Is the Council prepared to commission their specialist leisure consultant to work with the school in developing a costed options appraisal for a future operating model?

Will the Council agree to Cabinet receiving this report before the end of 2022 to enable it to consider any additional transitional capital or revenue funding requirements identified?

Response of the Portfolio Holder for Customer and Community Services

Thank you for your question. I am confident that we have the expertise across our leisure, property, education, and finance services to provide a good level of support to the school as it considers its future approach to operating the leisure centre.

Our Leisure Review and the development of a leisure strategy will help to provide a strategic overview of leisure provision across the Dorset Council area. This will help to ensure that sports and leisure provision will be sustainable and have a positive impact on improving community health. The strategy is likely to focus on the need for leisure facilities to be accessible, affordable, and sustainable, with equity of provision and areas of health inequalities given priority. Any future funding considerations will be aligned to this strategy.

Question 4 from Dawn Rondeau on behalf of “We are Weymouth”

We Are Weymouth is Weymouth’s Business Improvement District. We represent over 560 businesses within the town, with 67 of these being accommodation providers.

In the past few weeks, concerns have been raised by guest house owners, the Weymouth Hoteliers Association, holiday let owners and management agents regarding the removal of parking provisions for their guests, in particular:

- That holiday let owners will no longer be eligible to apply for yearly permits for guest use
- That the hotel/guest house parking scratch card system is being withdrawn

These permits and discounted scratch cards are vital not only for businesses, but for visitors to the town, who may already be discouraged by Weymouth’s lack of parking or park and ride infrastructure, providing them with an option for affordable parking within the town during their visit, which for a seven-day stay, could equate to £70 – a significant and deterring sum. Most B&Bs and Guest Houses market and publish the fact that these vouchers are in operation and available as an incentive to book their stay in Weymouth, as parking is such a concern for most customers.

It is our belief that removal of yearly permits and scratch cards will be detrimental to Weymouth’s visitor economy, with potential visitors to the town opting to choose another coastal resort, where parking is more readily available at a reduced or no cost.

We have written to Cllr Ray Bryan, Portfolio Holder for Transport, Highways and Environment, and Cllr Jon Orrell in his role as Dorset Councillor for Melcombe Regis, and have been informed by Elizabeth Murray, Strategic Parking Project Manager that Dorset Council do not intend to change its position.

We are very disappointed with Dorset Council's response as the consultation lacked any detail on the breadth and implications of these changes, and we understand that Dorset Council have made changes to the strategy for Corfe Castle, which does not fall in-line with your statement about consistency.

We therefore ask the Portfolio Holder for Transport, Highways and Environment:

- Will Dorset Council re-consider its position, acknowledging the value that tourism and visitors bring to Weymouth, and that the removal of these permits and scratch cards will be detrimental to the town and businesses?
- What does Dorset Council propose to resolve these issues and support the visitor economy?

Question 5 from Claire Wall

As the chair of the hotel/guesthouse association and a guest house owner myself, I would like to raise a question on behalf of myself/members who run businesses in Weymouth town to Councillor Ray Bryan.

A member of ours recently made a call to Dorset parking to purchase more discounted scratch cards for the car parks as we have been doing for many years, it was made known during that call we could no longer purchase them as of January 2022.

Once this was confirmed and the news passed on to all members, you cannot imagine the scale of stress and anxiety this has caused.

As a popular tourist town our members now feel undervalued with this unfair handicap on our businesses. We do not understand why there were no discussions undertaken on the impact this would cause if these scratch cards were removed.

Guests who stay for long periods and return year after year appreciate the parking difficulties in finding a space on the road close to the beach. This has previously been made easier by the choice of a reasonably priced scratch card for the car parks nearby.

We all feel without this offer we would see less footfall in our town and businesses who also rely on tourism like ourselves will also see decline. These also include restaurants, cafes, theatres, shops even to boat trips, buses, taxis and daytrip excursions.

All these rely on tourism, tourism is the main revenue in Weymouth and has to be looked at favourably.

Most of the guest houses/ hotels in Weymouth especially along the seafront are lease holders, our rents are payable to our landlord Dorset Council. As well as being

businesses we are residents, workers, tenants and tourism operators adding that all up, it is an incredible amount of revenue paid back into the local economy.

If guests visiting our town are only having a choice of a limited amount of street permits to park, our roads are going to be heavily congested and will just create chaos, also no good for the environment, this could be avoided if it had been thought through along with consultation aimed at the correct parties. One guest house alone spent £280 for 4 on-street permits along with £6.000 on scratch cards from May 2021 to September 2021, this proves the discount scratch cards were the guests overall preferred choice, imagine the revenue and benefits to Dorset Council if this service became available for ALL guest houses/ accommodation providers without onsite parking to purchase.

We are asking if the scratch cards can be reinstated? This would remove the chaos, fear and anxiety felt by all our members for the coming year, guests more often than not waive the offer of a free on road permit and opt for the discount scratch card as they find Weymouth as difficult as residents to find spaces to park on the streets during high season.

Tourism has been hit hard during the pandemic and needs support, understanding and consideration from Dorset Council to help build our businesses back up to pre-covid levels.

We would be happy to work with Dorset Council to produce a fair outcome that works for both sides, not only for parking but further projects that would increase the success of our town.

Thank you for your time and listening to our views on this issue.

Question 6 from Joy Sangste

We are disappointed to hear very recently that all provision for holiday cottage guests to use parking permits in Weymouth both on street as well as council owned car parks is being removed with immediate effect. Parking permits have been purchased by owners of holiday cottages for decades for the use of guests and payment contributes to the council. We have been informed that there will be absolutely no provision for owners to obtain council car parking permits at any enhanced cost, or for guests to pre-pay for parking. However, there is current provision for both of these aspects: platform and payment gateway for guests to pay in advance for car parking and for owners to pay for council car park permits – all hosted on the website:

<https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/parking/permits/weymouth-and-portland-area/weymouth-portland-weekly-parking-permit>.

Will the cabinet look at best practice around the country, where councils have successfully attracted tourists to park and pay online via a website or parking apps for car parks, offering a specialist tourist permit, whilst charging an appropriate rate.

Examples are: <https://www.northdevon.gov.uk/parking/parking-permits/visitor-and-tourist-permits/4-and-7-day-permits/>

And

<https://eastdevon.gov.uk/parking/car-park-permits/car-park-permits-we-offer/parking-permits/> .

Our guests alone may spend around £1 million in the Dorset area once they arrive, are the cabinet keen to facilitate the continued success of tourism aided by appropriate parking provision, which supports so many

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment for questions 4, 5 and 6

Over the last year much research has been done, including engagement with the public, Town & Parish council, BIDS, Chambers and other organisations, to work out a charging strategy that works for residents, businesses, workers and also works for Dorset Council. Through this period, all stakeholders had the opportunity to respond to the proposals, including the withdrawal of permits and Scratch Cards, with the expectation that organisations would respond on behalf of the community that they represent. Having completed a benchmarking exercise against other similar visitor destinations in the South of England, it was decided that all discounted parking for visitors and tourists to Dorset should be removed so that affordable permits could be introduced to support people who live and work in Dorset.

Following the feedback received in the last month from holiday accommodation businesses in Weymouth, a meeting was held between Dorset Council Officers and Councillors, including Cllr Ray Bryan (Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment) to look at solutions. A number of proposals were put forward including the suggestions you have made. After much deliberation, it was decided that the decision to remove permits and Scratch Cards for visitors to Dorset needed to remain. The reasons for this were to ensure consistency with other holiday destinations in the Dorset Council area and to retain funds for the new permits for residents, businesses and workers.

The impact of this decision will be monitored, and changes made if necessary. This year, the use of the Weymouth Park & Ride will be investigated to see if there is a more affordable parking option for visitors to Weymouth.

Question 7 from Linda Stevenson

How can local groups like Dog Friendly Weymouth and Portland, and Paws on Weymouth Beaches and Open Spaces-Dog Walkers clearing the way, reach the residents who are concerned with dog fouling regarding the role they have played in changing attitudes to responsible dog ownership and how they can help everyone understand dog owners are equally concerned, but are finding it increasingly difficult to walk dogs in the community they live in for fear of abuse?

Can the Council assure people of the role of the dog wardens and council employees who can issue fines for dog fouling, and when this will be implemented?

We have been told it is not often possible because dog fouling happens during the hours of darkness which, as dog owners know, dogs are walked at all times of the day. This is evident when we walk our dogs and report dog fouling to the Dog Warden Department via email or telephone. We have been assured all reports of dog fouling will be investigated sadly something that, up until recently, was not happening.”

We would also like answers to the ongoing discrimination against families with assistance dogs or mobility issue in gaining access to public spaces on Dorset Beaches.

Without an individual Equality Impact Assessment where each public space is assessed and permanent adjustments made this is seen as indirect discrimination by disabled people who live, visit or holiday in Dorset.

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Customer and Community Services

Thank you for your question. The council recognises the important role of groups that promote responsible dog ownership. We will work with all members of the community to help improve understanding of the law and the welfare of dogs and the benefits of responsible dog ownership. No-one should live in fear of abuse and incidents need to be reported to the authorities.

There are six Dorset Council Animal Welfare and Dog Control Officers carrying out a range of duties in a large geographical area. They undertake patrols in hotspot areas where there are known problems but with such a large area to focus on, it is difficult to be in the right place at the right time to witness an offence. To help with enforcement we have a further twenty Town and Parish Council authorised officers. All reports of fouling are investigated but the evidence supplied often doesn't reach the standard required to take enforcement action. We encourage complainants to provide as much detail as possible so that we can carry out patrols in the daylight hours that will coincide with the occurrence of likely offences.

People using an assistance dog do not have to comply with the exclusion restrictions or the requirement to dispose of dog faeces. An Equalities Impact Assessment was done for the PSPO and is updated as necessary. The Council needs to achieve a balance between access to exercise areas for dog owners and the protection of public health. Specific concerns are being looked at by officers as part of a review of the Dog-related Public Spaces Protection Order.