

Councillor Questions – Cabinet 28 February 2023

1. Question from Cllr C Sutton

As you will know, in 2016, our predecessor Authority withdrew support from the 22 youth clubs it previously ran or supported. A number have since closed, but many are now run by community organisations and charities. However, like many voluntary sector organisations, they are struggling with the cost of living crisis. Whilst they can apply for up to £5,000 per year for project funding from Dorset Council's Youth Fund, many may close without additional support. For example, at STEPS Club for Young People, where I am a trustee, utility costs have risen from around £6,000 to £14,000 per annum. In addition, Dorset Council is about to finally complete the Lease arrangement with the Charity, after which they will be responsible for additional building contracts totalling around £5,000 and a further £5000 for building insurance every year. The Club, the only full time youth centre in Weymouth & Portland, will have to find an additional £18,000 per year, an overall rise in expenditure of almost 30%. In this context, my question is:

Can the Cabinet please consider making a 'cost of living' grant available to youth clubs which have been working so hard to keep youth work alive in Dorset and support our young people through these difficult times?

Response from the Leader of the Council

Youth organisations are able to apply for grants from any of the 3 core community support grant schemes available in addition to the specifically created grant fund for youth support from Children's services. Several youth organisations in Dorset have successfully done this. Please contact our communities and partnerships team for further information.

There are about 4000 voluntary community sector organisations across Dorset, all of which have been feeling the impact, firstly of covid recovery and now the cost of living challenge. Dorset Council needs to support the whole VCS in a balanced and proportioned way within our available resources.

2. Question from Cllr J Andrews

There is growing concern at the danger to pedestrians and School children, mothers with push chairs and disabled persons using the single narrow pavement on Marston Road, Sherborne. In places it is less than a metre wide so if you meet someone walking in opposite directions one of you must step into the road to pass.

Above the junction with Coombe where both the highway carriage way and the pavement are particularly narrow there is a well-documented history of large vehicles riding on the footway as they try to squeeze past each other. This is a great concern for parents on the Barton Farm Estate whose children use this as a route to both the Gryphon and Sherborne Primary School and I don't believe this area has been assessed as a safe route to school for both the gryphon comprehensive or Sherborne primary school.

Similar considerations apply in the short section of Coombe from its junction with Marston Road to the point where it meets Blackberry Lane. Last week a Gryphon pupil cycling to school was knocked from her bike at the Marston Road junction. The road at Coombe meets Marston Road at an acute angle which makes turning from Marston Road into Coombe difficult. Coupled with the high volumes of traffic passing through the junction at peak times makes this one of the most dangerous crossing places for pedestrians in town.

Will the Highway Authority commit to an urgent and proper evaluation of road safety issues in this locality and could cameras be set up for a short period to record traffic movements so that highway officers have a clear understanding of what is happening here both at the Coombe junction and on the narrow section of Marston Road?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment

We were sorry to hear about the recent collision involving a young cyclist and a car at the junction of Coombe and Marston Road. Correspondence relating to this incident has been responded to directly by the Road Safety Team.

As you are aware, the Council has received correspondence from a range of people regarding the traffic calming measures on Marston Road, the recent incident involving a young cyclist being knocked from her bike, issues with the narrow footways, vehicles mounting the footway and vehicle speeds in general on Marston Road.

A full response on the issues surrounding the traffic calming installed on Marston Road was provided by the Development Team in September 2022. This outlined the processes and responsibilities for outstanding works and Safety Audits relating to the traffic calming works specifically. These processes are ongoing and the scheme will remain under review. If necessary, it will receive a stage 4 Safety Audit as is provided for within the Section 278 under which the works are being delivered.

There are ongoing investigations into changes to the 30mph limit gateway location on Marston Road aimed at making this more effective and intuitive for drivers.

With regards to the specific question, yes, our Road Safety team can commit to undertaking a review of the issues at this location and to utilising a camera survey to inform that work (if required). As a result of this, some proportionate interventions that could assist in improving any identified problems may be proposed. If more extensive works or schemes were required to resolve identified issues, and were thought to be deliverable within the very restricted road space in this location, then it should be noted that the threshold for delivery is high for road safety schemes and is necessarily evidence based due to the limited funding and resource available. This site would need to be compared with other sites across Dorset, if no evidence emerges that issues here are worse than elsewhere in the County, then it would be unlikely to be prioritised for delivery.

3. Question from Cllr R Legg (to be read out by Cllr J Andrews)

Have the Dorset Highway Authority and Network Rail finally agreed on the text of a joint submission to the Office of Rail and Road to determine whether the Hummer railway bridge is a brand-new bridge or merely a repaired old one? If they rule it is a new bridge then the new barrier system on the approach to the bridge could cost £300,000. In that case will Network Rail foot the bill but if the ruling goes the other way will we accept that the existing installed bollards are sufficient to protect the railway line?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment

Dorset Council sent Network Rail final approval of the proposed joint submission on Thursday last week. We anticipate Network Rail's confirmation of this letter within the next week, after which the letter will be jointly issued to the ORR. We will need to receive the ORR's response before the second part of your question can be considered.

4. Question from Cllr R Legg (to be read out by Cllr J Andrews)

A post appeared on social media yesterday about the long-delayed repair of the damaged wall at Kitt Hill, Sherborne. The post contained the full text of a long letter from Chris Loder MP to a constituent. It is hard to believe that the letter was written without the intention of it being published in this way. (A copy of the post and letter are appended to this question for completeness). In the letter he accuses the authority of putting appalling and unfair pressure on the owner, flatly refusing to help, and issuing an inaccurate press release to take scrutiny away from the Council's actions. Will you now issue a detailed point by point rebuttal of the MP's claims? If not is there any reason why local councillors should not support any claims for maladministration brought against the authority by those affected by the severe disruption of the last twelve months, including the owner of the property?

Have you seen this, "WE NOW HAVE THE TRUTH OF THE STORY RE KITT HILL!
ABSOLUTELY UNBELIEVABLE THAT DORSET COUNCIL HAVE NOT SORTED
THIS GIVEN THE VERY SAD CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE HOUSE OWNERS.
IF WE HAD BEEN TOLD?

I AM SURE WE WOULD HAVE PURSUED DORSET COUNCIL FOR
MAINTENANCE AND NOT THE OWNERS!

Dear Vicky

I'm grateful for your patience following your correspondence about Kitt Hill in Sherborne.

I know that for a year now, the issues surrounding the A30 at Kitt Hill have been the bane of our lives - for motorists, pedestrians and businesses alike in Sherborne. In normal circumstances, it would have been a quick and easy fix. But the situation has been complicated by a multitude of issues causing it to drag on for far too long - albeit with a lot of effort behind the scenes and I'm pleased to be able to give you a full explanation of the situation as I see it.

It was a year ago that a lorry hit the wall on Kitt Hill and drove off. The impact destabilised the wall, including the property above leaving a heap of rubble in the road. Dorset Council also closed Cornhill at the request of local Councillors. The reason this mess has taken so long is two-fold. The property insurers refused to cover the hit and run damage and Dorset Council, despite early indications of help refused to do any work directly and have dragged out a decision for months and months. In September, I chaired an urgent meeting with all parties concerned to get a remedy to this. Four months afterwards, in January, the responsible director finally said that any cost to reopen the road was not a justifiable use of public money. It ended with an impasse and generated a growing colossal bill for a very elderly and poorly couple to have to bear – most of which is the Council's cost of traffic lights and scaffold rather than actual structural works.

Time and time again, I use my role to bring relevant parties together to try and expedite solutions to seemingly impossible issues. It has secured resolutions to perennial road issues like flooding on the A35 in Dorchester in a way that has not been done before. The difference between the A35 and the A30, is that the government run the A35 through National Highways where I would typically hold them to account, but Dorset Council operate the A30 where a Dorset Councillor should hold them to account.

The Sherborne West Councillor Matthew Hall has been totally absent in all of this. The local Councillor has not been in touch once with these poor residents to help them and despite his yellow leaflets being distributed in Sherborne and further afield, I understand that Matthew actually lives in Exeter – and has done so for some time - leaving this poor elderly couple, not just to cope with costs of the work, but with the constant demand from the Council itself of many tens of thousands of pounds – just for their traffic lights. Even though the Council has had the road dug up for months at the bottom of Greenhill where these traffic lights would be required anyway!

It is my opinion, that Dorset Council has put the most appalling and unfair pressure on an elderly lady, herself poorly with cancer and did not just flatly refuse to help, but did so only, after many months. The Council even issued a press release, which local councillors pushed out two weeks ago saying the work would start 'tomorrow'. But if you regularly drive passed, you will know that nothing happened. Despite a direct request not to issue a press statement (that was incorrect) this appears to have been done to take the public scrutiny away from the Council's and Councillor's actions. It really is appalling.

But, whilst it has been a very difficult period, there is hope! We have seen the first real meaningful works take place yesterday and whilst a timeline is unclear, I think we are talking about weeks until the road is fully re-open. Not because the Council are sorting it out, nor insurers - but the elderly couple themselves using up their own savings to reopen the road.

I hope this update explains fully the situation to you and I'm grateful again for your patience in waiting for this reply.

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment

Dorset Council works positively with Chris Loder as MP for West Dorset and we are grateful for his continued efforts in speaking up for Dorset in Parliament.

Knowing that we have such a positive relationship makes it all the more disappointing that Mr Loder did not contact the Council to check the facts before writing an open letter to a newspaper about events following an incident when a lorry was driven into a privately owned wall at Kitt Hill, Sherborne. If Mr Loder had contacted us first then I hope that we could have avoided the false impression that Dorset Council is responsible for repairing the property owners' wall, that pressure has been put on the property owners and that the Council is responsible for delays in repairing the wall. We could also have avoided an untrue headline and the false impression that councillors have not worked hard to resolve the problem so that the road can be fully re-opened.

We respect the important role played by MPs in speaking up on behalf of residents. Sometimes this will involve an MP questioning or disagreeing with the Council but I hope that in future we can work through concerns together and not through letters to newspapers.

5. Question from Cllr G Taylor

I refer to the confidential paper 'Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF). Acquisition of 30 family homes under the LAHF grant programme'. I would like to question the financial section, para 15. 40% of the funding for the acquisitions is from a government grant; the remaining 60% is proposed to be from Dorset Councils Capital programme for 2023/24.

As the capital programme was approved at Full Council on 14 February 2023, just two weeks ago and the capital programme was fully committed albeit with £2M in contingency reserves can I please have confirmation as to which of the items from the capital programme are to be removed from this programme or alternatively if there is going to be borrowing to ensure the capital programme is retained as approved by FC.

Responses from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Commercial and Capital Strategy

Full Council approved the Budget Strategy at its meeting on 14th February. The Budget Strategy contained details of the funding requirement for the 23/24 capital programme and explained that the specific projects within that programme are currently being reviewed for affordability given the recent rise in interest rates. The updated Capital programme is on the Cabinet forward plan to be considered on 28th March 2023 once the review is complete.

6. Question from Cllr B Heatley

In the first 4 years of its operation, it looks like Dorset Council will have financed around **£35m** of its operations from freeing up earmarked reserves, of which about £20m arose in the exceptional pandemic year of 2020/21. See Table 1 below.

In addition, as a result of the Safety Valve agreement with the Department for Education, a further **£20m** of earmarked reserves will be applied over the next two years to reducing the cumulative deficit on the Dedicated Schools Grant, principally arising from the Higher Needs Block.

At the Budget meeting on 14 February 2023 the Leader announced that a further **£2m** of earmarked reserves were to be made available to fund in 2023/24 a (very welcome) Cost of Living Crisis Fund that was not in the Budget proposals, although Members generally were not aware before that date that such funds were available.

Our total reserves are finite, and Dorset Council will have spent around **£57m** of them over its first four years.

Two questions:

Would the Portfolio Holder be prepared to find a way to make the process of deciding that earmarked reserves can be made available for general revenue expenditure rather more transparent?

For how long does the Portfolio holder expect to be able to continue to fund Dorset Council's operations at this rate from this source?

Table 1

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
General notes		Pandemic		
General reserve at year start	29	28	33.2	33.2
Deficit for that year	5	15	0.6	8.4
General reserve at year start less deficit	24	13	32.6	24.8
General reserve next year start	28	33.2	33.2	34.7
Implicit contribution from earmarked reserves	4	20.2	0.6	9.9

Source: Budget papers and Q4 and Q3 (for 2022/23) Outturn papers for the years in question. These may have been superseded by later audited figures, but the broad picture should be about right unless I've misinterpreted or misunderstood something.

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

1. When we report the quarter 4 outturn the reserves are reported at that time. the report gives the figures for the reserve balance of the general fund and earmarked

reserves. in this year £33.2m and £157.8m – I would add that the earmarked reserves have risen from £146.5m in the proceeding year.

In the govts policy announcement in December last the made us aware of their intention to focus on levels of council reserves as such govt intend to explore a user-friendly publication on local authority reserves and I will work with officers to ensure that we as a council comply with any such regulation. We will also ensure that the what the govt may consider to be user friendly is in fact actually in a readable and understandable form for members as I am sure we will all agree what govt considers to be such is not always the case.

2. As you have stated it is not a normal period and past figures are skewed by the pandemic. The council's budget is a balanced budget and therefore there can be no intention to use reserves from the outset, only if an anomaly or unexpected outcome occurs do we use reserves. In the budget strategy the s151 officer has stated the levels of reserves are "adequate for the risks that the council is currently able to anticipate".