

**Full Council – 13 February 2024  
Public Participation**

**1. Question from Penny Quilter**

I would like to ask about trees at the Old Council building at North Quay in Weymouth, which is currently being demolished (permission granted on 20th July 2023).

- The felling of 6 trees at the front of the building was carried out at the end of 2023, ostensibly “To allow safe demolition of building “. The building is being demolished from the rear and it is unclear why it was necessary to remove these trees.
- According to the Tree Survey dated 10.02.23, 1 of these 6 trees was semi-mature and the rest were young, ranging from 4m to 8m in height and included species of Holly, Silver Birch and Ash. Only one of these trees was in poor condition.
- At the planning meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> July it was suggested that these 6 trees might be replaced by specimens in pots.
- I understand that Dorset’s tree planting objectives (and those in the draft Weymouth Neighbourhood plan) are to increase tree cover. I trust that the “treescape” will be improved on the North Quay site with an overall increase in trees.
- Historic photographs show street trees in the pavement opposite the site when it was houses. It should be possible to “thicken” the existing street tree planting. This could be achieved as a planning condition for any future development.
- There are 7 mature birch trees in the car park area on the demolition site that do not appear in the Tree Survey (4 on the east and 3 on the west side of the main building). These currently have barrier protection. Presumably, these trees are to be protected and retained.

**Please can you comment as far as possible on the points raised and confirm that a tree protection and re-planting plan has been made for the site and more specifically confirm that the plan includes the replacement of felled trees with an appropriate, equivalent species, to be planted in the ground?**

**Response from Cllr D Walsh**

It was necessary to remove the frontage trees to enable safe and effective operational access for machinery to carry out the demolition works. Given that the approved additional car park use is temporary it was not considered “conventional” tree planting of a site allocated for redevelopment was appropriate.

Hence the compensatory provision approved was replacing 6 frontage trees with 10 trees in pots/planters to the frontage.  
I confirm the 7 birch trees elsewhere on the site are retained.

## **2. Question from Rob Cheeseman**

There has been an expectation for some time that the **Level 2 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA L2) for Weymouth** would be published by now. Following interactions with Weymouth Town Council I understand there was a release date set for September 2023 following a briefing to Weymouth Town Council from Dorset Council. This release failed to happen and a future date has not been given.

I learned in November that the report would be formally released following discussions with the Environment Agency.

Separate submissions by the Environment Agency (EA) to the Weymouth Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group in December 2023 as part of Regulation 14 consultation indicated that the EA were satisfied that SFRA L2 has assessed the current and future flood risk for the Weymouth Town Centre Area.

**When will the Level 2 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA L2) for Weymouth be published and what is the reason for the delay in its publication?**

## **Response from Cllr D Walsh**

Officers in both the Strategic Planning and Flood and Coastal Erosion Teams have been working with consultants to prepare the Level 2 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) for Weymouth town centre. An important element of the SFRA is for the Environment Agency to update their advice to Dorset Council to reflect the findings of the SFRA. This process is now drawing to an end and will enable the SFRA to be published later in February 2024.

## **3. Question from Arthur Schaefer**

With reference to Agenda item 4(3) Exception to Council tax premium. For properties that are actively marketed for sale or rent, limited to 6 months period after April 2025.

Will the council consider extending the period of exception if the property refers to a retirement home such as Cloverdale Court, Lyme Regis, which is subject to strict leasing conditions, i.e. minimum age requirements of 55 years, no children allowed and holiday lettings prohibited? Potential buyers are limited to a small niche band of people who fit the strict criteria and those who can afford the expensive service charge in excess of £4500 p/a. The sale of such property is difficult and often exceeds the 6-month period needed to effect a sale.

## **Response from Cllr J Haynes**

Thank you for your question.

The exception you refer to in your question is one of a list of potential exceptions looked at during a National Consultation.

We await the final supporting regulations, as do all Local Authorities, which will stipulate the exact detail.

It is anticipated that where any exception may have an associated maximum set period of award, that this will be fixed, but as with all exceptions we are only able to provide guidance on possible outcomes at this stage.

## **4. Question from Alex Bailey**

"What a whirlwind 2023 has been for all of us! Despite the challenges, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who collaborated with me during that tumultuous period. Your contributions were truly invaluable to the campaign, even though my involvement has since come to an end. Unfortunately, Councillor Flower chose not to share the advice from Richard Wald KC publicly, and my opinion of him then remains unchanged – as reported by the Dorset Echo.

Let's now turn our attention to the future, specifically focusing on the current budgetary situation. We must consider the insights provided by individuals such as Weymouth Town Councillor David Gray, as well as the perspectives offered by Dorset's Lone Ranger, Councillor Gary Stuttle. Additionally, we should take into account the remarks made by Dorset Council's treasury manager, David Wilkes, regarding the concerning borrowing trends, with a total of £219 million borrowed and £7 million spent on interest to service external debt. These figures paint a bleak picture of Dorset Council's financial health, especially when coupled with the year-on-year 5% increase in rates for most households, particularly those in Band D in Weymouth. Despite these challenges, there are still some council officers and individuals in this chamber who maintain that Dorset Council possesses sufficient emergency funds.

We cannot ignore the dire financial situation faced by Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole (BCP) Council, which is burdened with a staggering £1 billion debt. Given these circumstances, my question remains: What distinguishes Dorset ratepayers that Dorset Council consistently ranks as the third, and sometimes fourth, highest spender per head of population in England?"

## **Response by Cllr G Suttle**

In respect of the Council's financial position your question covers FOUR points

- 1) Kings Counsel advice
- 2) Council borrowing
- 3) Emergency funds, which I understand to be a reference to reserves
- 4) Relative spend on services

Taking each of these in turn

Firstly, On Mr Bailey's opening comment about legal opinion we obtained in connection with the Bibby Stockholm barge, Cllr Flower has already answered a question in this chamber and explained the advice we received from our KC.

Now turning to the second point on Council Borrowing. Dorset Council typically borrows money to finance capital projects that will have a long term benefit the population of Dorset. This is not borrowing to fund day to day service delivery.

**The Councils borrowing** is outlined in appendix 3 of item 9 on this evenings agenda.

Para 3.3 has a table showing the councils gross debt of £219m as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023.

As set out in the table following para 3.6 of the same report the Council has set an operational boundary of borrowing of £443m. So the Council borrowing is less than 50% of the operational boundary.

You also raise the level of interest payable with is £8m for 2023/24 as shown in table 8 after para 4.2.

The same table shows that the Council is forecasting £6m of investment income, driven by interest earned. So the **net** financing costs are £2M which represents 3.8% of net revenue streams.

I hope that highlighting the analysis contained within appendix 3 allays your concerns as to the impact of the Council's borrowing.

Turning now to the third item **Adequacy of emergency funds.**

Again, turning to the main body of the report paragraph 22.4 outlines General fund reserves have increased from £28.2m as at 31st March 2020 to £34.75m as at 31 March 2023.

And earmarked reserves have increased from £85.4m to £140.9m over the same period.

The **fourth and final part** of your question references Dorset's **relative spend on services.**

The reference to having the third or fourth highest spender per head.

Unfortunately this is not true, the Office for National Statistics ([ONS](#)) data shows Dorset Council as very much middle of the pack in terms of relative spend per head of population.

I think there may be a misinterpretation of the widely reported information about Dorset's relative position in terms of Council Tax.

As reported to the Place and resources Committee on 17<sup>th</sup> January, for the parts of Council Tax which the Council sets, Dorset is ranked 13<sup>th</sup>

As outlined in the paper, Dorset Core spending power increase is reliant upon Council Tax, with the Government expectation that Councils take the maximum flexibility.

The Leader of this Council continues to lobby with our local MP's for a fairer funding settlement to address this. Recent success here is seen by the final local Government finance settlement providing a further £3.9m for Dorset Council , which is in recognition of Social Care , Home to School Transport and rural service delivery.

Dorset's MP Chris Loder has also in the last fortnight met with the Treasury and the Prime Minister to discuss Dorset's finances, seeking solutions to the systemic underfunding.