

Full Council

18 July 2024

Public Participation – Questions from Members of the Public

Question 1: - Submitted by Richard Lonsdale

Dorset Council was formed by merging Weymouth & Portland, four District Councils and the County Council. As such Dorset Council took on the responsibilities of all those councils.

One of those responsibilities was to hear representations by members of the public concerning issues in their area. Now, those voices can only really be heard in Dorchester. There is an exception – the area planning committees.

Using petitions as an example, until today, only one petition has reached the threshold to be discussed at Full Council. That was on Weymouth Parking charges. Potentially another is coming up in a few minutes on an issue related to East Dorset. I doubt someone living in Alderholt has much opinion about Weymouth parking charges. Equally I doubt someone in Bridport is overly concerned about a leisure centre in Pamphill.

Could consideration be given to the formation of area committees, as with planning, to offer more local access and provide more flexibility over the nature of petitions, time for questions and statements and access to full council if necessary?

Answer – Cllr Nick Ireland

The creation of area boards was a topic of discussion in the Shadow Authority which preceded the creation of Dorset Council, and it was expected to be taken up by the newly elected administration after May 2019. I don't recall a formal decision being made on area boards after that date but instead it was quietly shelved.

When listening to our residents and parish councils over the past five years, many perceive a gap between the local representation desired and that Dorset Council provides. However, I should highlight the fact that Dorset has many town councils with populations of around 10,000 or more that already have the authority and resources to deal with many local issues, and to provide robust representation for their communities.

A key item of the Liberal Democrat manifesto for the elections this May was, and I quote ...

“Create a well-run council with vision and ambition; making decision-making as local and democratic as possible; listening more to local residents and creating a genuine partnership with town and parish councils.”

We have already commenced several strands of work towards achieving these outcomes.

Initial discussions have been held with DAPTC to understand how we may leverage their connections better.

We are changing the planning scheme of delegation tonight to ensure the views of parish and town councils, and their local ward members, are better considered.

We are running a series of eight Big Conversation engagement events across our area from late July to mid-September to give residents an opportunity to talk with local councillors and cabinet members in-person about the issues that really matter to them.

An independent study and review is currently underway by Graham Sansom, (Adjunct Professor at the UTS Institute for Public Policy and Governance) & Dr Graham Morris (Exeter University), investigating the interaction of our larger parishes and town councils with Dorset Council; this is due to report back later this year.

And finally, we have in place a work stream to look at how other authorities, both in the UK and elsewhere, collaborate more closely with their lower tier authorities and residents for the mutual benefit of all. It's too early to give any definitive outcome but it's probably fair to say one model across the entire DC area probably won't work due to the differences and demands of our urban and rural communities, and instead we're likely to end up with a hybrid solution. We plan to have a pilot scheme for Sherborne and its surrounding parishes up and running soon, hopefully before the end of this year once the details have been ironed out.

Question 2: - Submitted by Hannah Small

I am sure that the council members agree with Dorset Councils Social Care recommendations to "Be more active with exercises or activities for wellbeing," that access to physical activity is paramount to keeping the population fit, physically and mentally healthy and able to work. One of the most effective ways for people to recover from short term injury, support mental health, keep long term disabled people active and working, and help older people continue in good physical health for longer, is access to a swimming pool. Swimming is scientifically proven and promoted by the NHS and Dorset Council Website as one of the best ways to achieve this. Specialist exercise therapy classes in a gym studio environment are also vitally important and many people with health issues use a mixture of both to maintain fitness levels, prevent further issues occurring and gain social and community support from peers thereby improving mental health. The majority of people with long term health conditions are unfortunately some of the poorest in society due to lack of access to supported employment and higher costs as a direct result of their condition. They are also the most likely to need to use public transport and need Social Care support to access physical activities that are suitable for their condition. Closing the facilities at Queen Elizabeth Leisure Centre has had a negative impact on the disabled population of Wimborne and its surrounding rural villages, resulting in a loss of access to relevant therapies including Exercise Therapy and Aqua Therapy. There is no replacement service of the same accessibility and quality within a reasonable and affordable distance of QELC, and

no rural public transport links for those who cannot drive due to ill health. Those that are available are oversubscribed and lack important accessibility features such as steps, ramps, hoists, changing facilities and a multi depth pool for deep water therapy. This has vastly increased the health inequality that is already a huge problem for disabled and older community members. It has increased costs to Social Care who are having to fund non local therapies, and the poorest members of the community who are having to find extra money to travel to and access basic physical exercise therapies in multiple locations across East Dorset, BCP and into Ringwood Hampshire. In light of the previous council's decision to close Queen Elizabeth Leisure centre and the resulting health inequality for disabled and elderly people, does the council have a plan to address this disparity?

Answer - Cllr. Jon Andrews

Thank you for your question. I think we all appreciate the benefits of being active and how this can have a positive impact on our physical and mental wellbeing. As a Council, we are particularly keen to ensure that we have an equity of leisure provision across the Dorset Council area and target health inequalities. Active Dorset's physical activity strategy – A Movement for Movement which was adopted by Dorset Health and Wellbeing Board last year, provides excellent guidance on how to build in activity in everyday life. Whilst we appreciate that the Council's decision to exit the management agreement and the new way in which the school is operating their leisure centre will have an impact on some, we are still fortunate to have access to 8 public leisure centres within this catchment area. All of these facilities provide GP referral schemes for those in our community that have health issues and may need additional support. The Council also commissions Livewell Dorset which is free to all residents and offers help to anyone wanting to increase their activity levels, as well as advice on where to access activities.

Question 3 – submitted by Rebecca Ilghany

It was argued by the previous council that there is plenty of leisure provision within a 20 minute driving distance of Queen Elizabeth Leisure Centre. This raises concerns with the environmental impact this has and goes against government targets to reduce emissions. Furthermore, since the closure of QELC, other local fitness providers have been overwhelmed with people unable to get on to now over subscribed classes with waiting lists. Such lack of exercise provision will only impact on the NHS, Public Health Dorset and Council's Adult Social Care. With respect to the 82 newly democratically elected council members, in comparison, we are presenting the largest ever submitted to Dorset Council with around 7000 signatures from irate constituents opposing the closure of QELC, a facility that has served the public since 1976 and been at the heart of generations within our community. This petition is endorsed by our local MP. From figures obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, after much scrutiny, it is clear QELC was under marketed and under priced in line with other local leisure centres and when considering the increase in population to the area, the largest conurbation, if this was managed correctly, QELC would have been in a much better position financially. With this in mind, will the

newly elected councillors listen to the will of the people and agree to work with Initio (who have recently issued a statement requesting such) and the local community to find a way forward for a new leisure centre to be opened as soon as possible on the site of QELC?

Answer – Cllr Jon Andrews

Thank you for your question. National policy identifies an accessible leisure catchment area as being **within** a 10-mile radius or 20 min drive time and is the reason that this has been used as a reference. We are fortunate that within the catchment of QE Leisure Centre, there are 8 alternative public leisure facilities, and as someone who represents an area of North Dorset, it would be wonderful if other parts of the Council area also had this level of exercise provision.

Unfortunately, given the age of the QE facility and the high levels of local competition, the centre has understandably required a large revenue subsidy over the years.

During the two-year notice period, Dorset Council have worked with Initio Learning Trust to identify ways in which the school's leisure facilities can still be accessed by the school and local community. The Council has also provided £881,000 towards centre improvements and the replacement of the all-weather pitch and will continue to support the trust as it and looks to maximise community usage following the completion of the building works.

Question 4 – submitted by Felicity Frost

We would like to draw your attention to a case in which the Scottish Borders Council were found to be acting illegally by closing a day care centre in 2022 without properly conducting an equality impact assessment.

We understand that while an Equality Impact Assessment on the closure of the Queen Elizabeth Leisure Centre was drafted, it was not completed and signed off. We question whether suitable alternative provision is really available for disabled service users in the local area, resulting in further disadvantage and health inequality. Given the huge impact of the closure of QELC on disabled people can you clarify the situation regarding the Equality Impact Assessment?

<https://brodies.com/insights/government-and-public-sector/court-of-session-finds-councils-closure-of-day-care-service-unlawful/>

Answer – Cllr Jon Andrews

Thank you for your question. QE Leisure School and Leisure Centre is owned by QE School Foundation Trustees and managed by Initio Learning Trust. Prior to the 1st April this year, the Council operated the leisure centre under a dual use management agreement. As the operators of the site, the Council had the option to withdraw from the management agreement on the provision it gave notice of 2 years.

The Council took this decision in March 2022 following a public consultation. The conclusions of the consultation were that there are 8 alternative public leisure within a 10-mile radius of QE and this level of provision was much higher than all the other parts of the Dorset Council area. All these alternative facilities provide access for disabled users and operate a GP referral scheme for those with health issues. As part of the Equality Impact Assessment review, we identified a shortfall in Aqua therapy and as a result have provided funding for this to be delivered at another local centre.

Although the school have been unable to engage a new operator, the facilities remain open for school and community club use. We will continue to work with Initio to identify ways in which the facilities can be maximised for community usage.

Question 5 – submitted by Roger Hussey

Why are Officers still enforcing an outdated scaffolding policy on Dorchester's High Street?

As a Dorchester based architectural Practice we are presently working on Nos 51, 52, 53, 57 & 64 High West Street together with the Museum.

All of these buildings are Grade 2 Listed and sit within the Conservation Area.

With the exception of the Museum all of these buildings were once fine town houses, for many years they have been offices but now, with the lack of demand for office accommodation, they are slowly returning to their original purpose, albeit apartments and maisonettes rather than grand houses.

Very little gets spent on keeping commercial premises in good repair so it is inevitable as part of any conversion that significant external refurbishment of elevations and roofscapes is necessary. Such schemes of work require scaffold and here lies the problem.

Dorset Council has a policy that limits scaffold erection in the High Street to two hours each evening and Sundays. We understand this has been in place for over 30 years and we believe dates from when the High Street was the trunk road (A35).

This policy is long overdue a rethink. The High Street is no longer a trunk road. Focussing scaffold erection into Sundays in an area that is becoming increasingly residential is not pleasant for those already living there and hoping to enjoy a 'day off'.

Significantly, this legislation places huge increased scaffold cost on property owners – money that would be much better spent on the buildings themselves to preserve and enhance Dorchester's architectural heritage. As a real example scaffold is being erected on our own offices at No 57 in August – the increased cost of doing this over several Sundays and outside of normal working hours is £18,800 excluding VAT.

There is no good reason to continue to enforce this outdated policy. If Members will not relax it completely at the very least scaffold erection should be allowed to take place between, say, 9.30am and 4.00pm, thus avoiding any perceived 'rush hour'.

To continue as things stand in the face of escalating construction costs is unacceptable.

Answer – Cllr Jon Andrews

The policy regarding the restriction of scaffolding erection times is not exclusive to High West Street in Dorchester, it is implemented across the entire unitary area. Officers evaluate each situation on a case-by-case basis, with the primary concern being the potential impact on highway users. This approach aims to mitigate risks and minimise disruption to traffic by imposing conditions that mandate erection at times when the road is quieter.

Question 6 – submitted by Annie Webster

Re: 14. Notice of Motion - The Nature of Emergency

Proposer:- Cllr Nick Ireland

Re: No.6 f. - Remove the use glyphosate and chemicals damaging to ecosystems/nature where possible.

I request that glyphosate and chemical herbicides damaging ecosystems/nature are removed completely NOT 'just where possible'.

Addressing the ecosystem/nature first, glyphosate, a neonicotinoid, where upon, it is said that a single teaspoon is enough to kill 1.25 billion bees, is seriously disrupting and therefore killing out right, pollinators especially bumble and honey bees. Also disrupting the small insects at the base of the food chain with ever increasing devastating effects. We need to encourage pollinators to thrive not just to survive. Unless we stop using these chemicals because of loss of pollinators, we will suffer food chains breaking down.

Scientists throughout the world have long been concerned with the effects of glyphosate on humans. It is a neurotoxin and an endocrine (hormone) disrupters, which causes cancerous tumours, birth defects and other developmental disorders i.e. ADHD and autism. The WHO lists glyphosate as 'probably carcinogenic'.

The Monsanto Roundup lawsuits in America bears out just how dangerous glyphosate is, with settlement agreements to the tune of approx \$11 billion, with approx another 54,000 claims against Monsanto in the pipeline.

So, basically, glyphosate is a killer and therefore has no place in threatening the lives of any residents or any domestic animals in the Dorset areas. Roads, pavements, public gardens, playgrounds/areas need to be chemical free.

As other places in the country have already done, let's make Dorset a glyphosate and other chemical herbicide free county. And switch to non-chemical methods of weed control in all areas used by the public.

Question 7 – submitted by Caz Dennett

The Nature Emergency motion is a most welcome step towards acknowledging “That nature is in long term decline and urgent action must be taken to reverse this”

However, the motion proposes to continue use of glyphosate. Glyphosate is a non-selective systemic herbicide, known commonly as weed-killer. Non-selective means it does not target specific species of plant, but kills all plant-life that is in the spray-zone.

Section 6 in the motion, lays out the goals for nature’s recovery by 2030, and says

- f. Remove the use of glyphosate and chemicals damaging to ecosystems/nature where possible.

The term “where possible” is too open. It doesn’t convey an ambition to prevent, reduce, restrict, or control glyphosate usage. I contacted nature expert, campaigner, and TV presenter Chris Packham for advice, and he sent me this message of encouragement for Dorset Council.

To the members of Dorset Council

I applaud that Dorset Council has a motion to declare a nature emergency- using the right language at critical time- a time when our wildlife locally and globally is suffering catastrophic declines. But to continue using Glyphosate across Dorset's urban areas is simply mind-boggling.

We know Glyphosate-based products have the potential to cause significant damage to human health and to the environment- why take that risk?

Wilder urban areas are better for nature and people- who can argue that our parks, streets and towns are only boosted by the presence of bees and butterflies.

In a biodiversity crisis we need leaders- this is a huge opportunity for the council to lead and demonstrate that emergency situations require ambitious, bold action.

I love Dorset, we’ve filmed many of the Spring/Autumn watches in Arne- let’s keep the buzz in Dorset!

I urge Dorset Council to be an ‘authority of action’ for nature, and rise to the challenge by reducing and restricting glyphosate usage.

Thank you



Chris Packham

TV Broadcaster and Environmental Campaigner.

14.07.24

To become a top performer in nature protection and restoration I ask this Council to commit to reducing and restricting glyphosate usage within an agreed timeframe. I recognize this is a challenge, we all recognize this is a challenge. However, the nature emergency demands we change our practices, because nature needs our critical care to recover, and to restore good health.

Q. Will Council members consider amending Item 6.f to:

Reduce and restrict the use of glyphosate and chemicals damaging to ecosystems/nature?

Answer to Qs 6&7 – Cllr Nick Ireland

The continued use of glyphosate, both by local authorities, and in other realms such as agriculture for example, is the cause of both continued debate and concern, not just in the UK but also in Europe and beyond. The WHO did indeed designate it as a possible carcinogen and our own **Dorset Council Pollinators Action Plan 2019 – 2024** states that “*research now appears to have found links between the use of this herbicide and the decline of bees*”. On the flip side, national governments have insisted that its use is safe when applied correctly, but we also know that they don’t particularly have a great track record when it comes to past public health and nature issues.

Dorset Council’s existing use of glyphosate is minimal when compared to agricultural use in Dorset where entire fields are sprayed before sowing. However, that doesn’t mean that as a responsible authority, we shouldn’t seek to reduce or even eliminate its application. Our current deployment of the herbicide is essentially in spraying sealed surfaces (aka pavements and kerbs) plus the very focused use on certain invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed and others where use is directed by Natural England to protect SSIs (and I’m aware that is counterintuitive).

We are working to reduce the use through various means such as removing soil and detritus from sealed surfaces combined with ensuring that when pavements and footpaths are replaced, the new surface is designed to be as weed resistant as possible.

Many other authorities in the UK have banned the use of glyphosates only to have to retract to various extents. We won't issue a ban now because for us it simply is not practical, but please be assured that Dorset Council is dedicated to tackling both the climate and nature emergencies and I will be amending the motion later to more accurately reflect what Dorset Council is both doing now and more importantly, committing to going forward.