

Full Council – 10 October 2024
Questions submitted by Councillors

Question 1 – submitted by Cllr Hannah Hobbs-Chell

I am grateful to the new cabinet for the commitment to Ferndown and to Ferndown Town Council to assist with a regeneration plan, and resolving the ongoing Barrington Centre lease situation, and appreciate that you are currently working from the previous administration's budgetary constraints and directions until the next financial year, especially for any capital works. I would however like to ask where the new leisure strategy is in progress? Along with a town centre that has been neglected over the past decade, Ferndown Leisure centre is also at the end of its life, and requires considerable consideration not just for Ferndown residents but for residents in the east of the county especially given changes in the leisure facilities in East Dorset. The land surrounding the leisure centre is under charitable ownership via the Town Council, and leased to Dorset Council, and I would like to ask if the cabinet could commit to investing in leisure in the east to support the huge health and wellbeing benefits of leisure. There is a very exciting collaborative opportunity to significantly enhance and invest in the health and wellbeing of the east of Dorset.

Question 2 – submitted by Cllr Matt Bell

Prior to becoming one of the Dorset Council Members for Radipole I began a campaign to highlight issues at Radipole Lake. This was in the form of a petition which remains open but already has roughly 2500 signatures including those online and on paper. The issue has also been highlighted on several occasions in the local media since the petition began. I thank the members of the public who took the time to sign the petition and shared their concerns and knowledge about the lake. The petition calls for all stakeholders to prioritise silt removal from the lake and river to increase flood water capacity and to reduce flooding in surrounding areas such as Radipole Park and Gardens where outfalls are believed to be hampered by the high silt level. The petition also calls for the creation of a consistent and effective management programme to be followed moving forward.

The lake is a prominent feature of both Radipole and Weymouth as a whole. Unfortunately, Radipole Lake has been neglected for many years and is no longer the prized asset it once was. The petition and media coverage prompted the involvement of key stakeholders including Dorset Council and initial discussions added significantly to the list of concerns I originally highlighted. There are concerns regarding potential risks to the SSSI status held by the nature reserve, flooding of the adjacent road, park, gardens and businesses, algae growth as well as the loss of a high-quality and treasured angling venue. The recently rejuvenated amenities at Radipole Park and Gardens spent much of the last autumn and winter flooded.

I was delighted when meetings were arranged involving all key stakeholders and some early progress was made, including improvements at Westham Bridge.

However, things have not progressed in a timely fashion on other aspects. Previous meeting notes about the lake from May stated that Wessex Water would clear outfalls along Radipole Park Drive, which are crucial to drain the park and gardens, by the end of August 2024 but this has not happened. This is due to issues accessing and inspecting some of the outfalls due to vegetation growth. There are also investigations ongoing into potential grants for silt removal and habitat restoration and I hope these can be expedited working closely with our colleagues at Natural England and RSPB. Every element of decision making and action at the lake seems to involve multiple organisations, it is crucial that Dorset Council drives this forward effectively. However, the planned September meeting regarding the lake was cancelled due to other officer commitments. What assurances can the Cabinet Member for Place Services give me that Radipole Park and Gardens will not spend another winter submerged and that the maintenance of a prized Weymouth asset will be prioritised in the future?

Question 3 – submitted by Cllr Spencer Flower

Unrealistic housing targets set by the new Government

The Government has announced intentions to build 1.5m new dwellings during the next five years. This will require a near doubling of the build rate threatening our green belt, AONB and other undeveloped land. This will hit Dorset particularly hard as we have little in the way of so-called brown field sites.

Legacy Local Plans and the emerging Dorset Local Plan includes policy which seeks a proportion of affordable housing when development schemes reach a certain size.

The new Liberal Democrat administration has indicated that it wishes to build more affordable housing for local people, which is a commendable ambition given the local demand, but this will be a serious challenge to achieve. The biggest barrier to achieving this aim will be the retention of viability as a material planning consideration.

There are several examples where permission has been granted and the developer has subsequently come back to the Council, claiming for whatever reason, that the schemes are no longer viable. This has resulted in a loss of the affordable housing allocations.

Can members be reassured that every effort is being made by the administration to lobby Government for the removal of viability as a material planning consideration or seek a reform of the current guidance, such that a fair proportion of new housing development in the Dorset Council area is affordable housing for rent or shared equity.

So my question is, what action is being taken by the Liberal Democrat administration to safeguard the provision of vitally important affordable housing in the Dorset Council area in the context of the emerging Dorset Local Plan and the anticipated amended standard methodology?

Question 4 – submitted by Cllr James Vitali

Since 2011, some 2771 new homes have been delivered in the North Dorset area. According to the latest Annual Position Statement published this month, there will be additional housing demand for over 2500 households in the North up to the year 2034.

We know there is a national shortage of homes, and North Dorset is more than playing its part to address that shortage. But for development to be legitimate in the eyes of local residents, they must believe that it will add to their communities, not take away from them or tarnish them. An important part of this is ensuring that developers contribute meaningfully to investment in local services and community facilities.

For some time, however, the North has been an outlier in Dorset, because it hasn't operated the Community Infrastructure Levy, and has relied solely on Section 106 contributions. Speaking to my parish and town councils, they worry that they are not seeing their fair share of Section 106 monies, and believe that CIL would help ensure our communities meaningfully gain from new housing.

I understand that CIL was going to be introduced in the North as part of the new Local Plan, but delays to its drafting and adoption have set that process back, and I am concerned that our residents are losing out as a result.

To this end, how does the Council intend to ensure that local residents in the North receive the investment they need in infrastructure and services to support new housing supply? Could I receive in writing a report on the status of Section 106 funding in the North? And would the Council now consider bringing the North into line with the rest of Dorset by introducing CIL in our area?

Question 5 submitted by Cllr Byron Quayle

At the most recent Schools Forum meeting, senior education leaders from Dorset suggested that BCP Council are actively seeking families to request their child's needs are met in a Dorset Council area educational setting.

Can the portfolio holder confirm how many children with an Education Health and Care Plan from other areas including BCP, have been enrolled at Educational settings in Dorset this academic year and how has this impacted on children in the Dorset Council area accessing these educational settings?

Question 6 submitted by Cllr Byron Quayle

Following a Freedom of Information (FOI) request dated October 16, 2023, Dorset Council confirmed that approximately £22.8 million had been paid by developers for educational purposes since 2019, but had not yet been allocated to specific projects.

Could the portfolio holder provide an update on how much of the £22.8 million has been allocated to educational projects since the FOI request in October 2023? Additionally, has a Dorset-wide policy been implemented to ensure that projects are identified promptly and funds are allocated efficiently, preventing developer contributions from remaining unused in Dorset Council accounts instead of being spent on educational needs?

Question 7 submitted by Cllr Bill Trite

I'm pleased to be able to point to:

1. Much co-operative, joint working between Dorset Council and Swanage Town Council in recent years, all to the public good and particularly in respect of cliff stability, beach recharge, flood defence and options for seafront traffic management. Another example of this constructive relationship is the Town Council's routine cutting of a large area of Dorset Council grassland at one entrance to the town, without charge to Dorset Council, as well as supplementing weed clearance work.
2. Long-time acknowledgment by the former Purbeck District Council and Dorset Council (as emergency planning authority, highway authority and coastal defence authority) that certain roads and drains near Swanage seafront are prone to widespread coverage by shingle and other debris as a result of wave overtopping during stormy conditions, and that the resultant hazard will be cleared by the authority in a timely manner with public rights of way reopened. (Where it could, the Town Council has always assisted this process in terms of supplying manual labour and co-ordinating clear-up operations - and is happy to continue to do so.)
3. Assurances by the new administration at County Hall that Dorset people are not about to experience any deterioration in service standards.

Why, therefore, with the present overspill of debris from the sea into the Lower High Street, has the Town Council now been informed that the Unitary authority has unilaterally decided no longer to accept any obligation to undertake this vital clearance and reopening work, unless Dorset Council is paid to do so by Swanage Town Council?

Question 8 submitted by Cllr Simon Gibson

There is widespread concern following recent proposals from Hampshire County Council to close a number of Household Recycling Centres, including Somerley, which serves many Dorset residents including residents in Verwood, Alderholt, St Leonards & St Ives & West Moors. It has been long understood that Dorset Council does not have adequate provision in the East of our County and the partnership working with Hampshire County Council has enabled our residents to maintain good and fair access. The Universal Services Select Committee of HCC has asked Cabinet to reconsider these proposals at their Cabinet meeting next week.

Q: Will the Portfolio Holder and officers seek an urgent meeting with Hampshire County Council ahead of their Cabinet meeting to encourage them to keep Somerley HRC open and to restate Dorset Council's commitment to working together to ensure that residents in the East have fair access to a suitable HRC?