

Cabinet – 19th November 2024

Questions from Councillors

1. Question from Cllr Craig Monks – Housing Needs

I am very proud that my ward is the home of Mountjoy school. Mountjoy school provides special education to children from across Dorset and neighbouring counties.

Many families who attend this school face significant challenges including housing needs when policies deem their housing choices unsuitable, leading to distressing placements in Weymouth bed and breakfasts, which result in difficulties such as disrupted education, long and costly school commutes, and additional financial strain.

Many families across the Council area face similar challenges but families who attend schools like Mountjoy face more extreme challenges including financial constraints due to higher care needs.

What measures could Dorset Council take to ensure that families with special needs, who are deemed homeless, can access suitable housing that meets their specific needs, even if this requires flexibility in housing policy?

Response by Cllr Gill Taylor

We fully understand and appreciate the challenges and the profound difficulties facing those many families across Dorset who need good quality, suitable and affordable housing. This includes the specific needs of households where family members have special educational needs or who are disabled – including those attending the Mountjoy School, as mentioned in the question from Cllr Monks. Our own figures show that there is a high number and very broad range of people in need of housing. This is reflective of national housing and economic pressures, but also reflective of a high level and complexity of support required within many of those families looking for a home. There is already excellent and detailed work carried out across Housing, Children's, Adults, and Health teams to consider how best to support those families, within the context of housing shortages and limited local or house type availability to match specific needs. That work always looks to focus on supportive options for families and the teams are always open to explore where a family are experiencing housing pressures and to seek realistic and sustainable solutions. We also work closely alongside our Registered Providers of Social Housing and Private Landlords to make sure that we are all aligned in the drive to find and provide suitable housing across the Dorset Council area, and to minimise the pressures outlined in the question relating to distance and reliance on temporary accommodation.

We have over 6,500 households on our Housing Register seeking social and affordable rented housing. During 2023/24 our affordable housing programme provided 508 new social homes, mainly through Registered Provider Housing Associations, and whilst this is considered very successful compared to other areas, we know that the demand and need is considerably higher. Transforming and ramping up the delivery of affordable homes across the Dorset Council area is at the centre of this Council's priorities and our we are formulating plans and actions to make change at pace, adding to what we do well, but doing much more to close those gaps. This includes making the most of available housing across the affordable and private rented sectors, and we work closely with families to help to explore options for their short, medium and long term housing needs. Sometimes, the shortage of available properties in local areas means that there is a wait for the most suitable or affordable home but our Housing Register team work with applicants to explore options and choices for families with specific support and housing needs.

In terms of how we let properties, this is governed by the Council's Allocation Policy, a statutory requirement covering the whole of the Dorset Council area and carefully planned to meet housing need fairly and effectively. Council Officers will determine priority and band households accordingly using a set and lawful criteria. Our highest priority band is A with the lowest being D and this is explained well within the Allocations Policy, available on our website. The Council is also subject to a range of legal duties to prevent homelessness but also to provide temporary accommodation and support into settled accommodation when a duty is determined. Temporary Accommodation includes Bed and Breakfast accommodation and leased accommodation, which is either managed and or owned by the Council. Recent investment to support operational objectives has shown significant success in high prevention outcomes (households prevented from homelessness) and therefore reducing reliance on expensive and unsuitable B&B and Temporary Accommodation. Over the past year, this has resulted in a reduction of 100 households in TA, of which over 50 families were in B&B accommodation.

At present, we have approximately 20 families in B&B. However, being a demand led service these figures do fluctuate. However, our overall objective is to eradicate the use of B&B hotels for families by the end of 2025.

Our success has ensured we are bucking the 'national' trend, which has seen significant increases in TA covering all cohorts. As it stands there are approximately 140,000 households living in TA nationally, with many of those households including children. This is around a 12% increase compared to this time last year. In Dorset we have reduced TA by 25% during that period.

Given the pressures on housing, we are developing an accelerated and ambitious plan to deliver our Housing Strategy. At the heart of that Strategy is a clear and ambitious vision to ensure our residents have access to affordable, suitable, secure homes where they can live well as part of sustainable and thriving communities. The delivery plan is underway and will be flexed to respond to emerging priorities and changes in pressure, legislation, or guidance in relation to accommodation with support. Please be assured, Cllr Monks, that these priorities very much include the need to support families who have children in schools such as Mountjoy, alongside the broad range of demand for housing, and work across this Council is coordinated to do this effectively, pragmatically and with the family's needs at the core.

2. Question from Cllr Craig Monks – Parnham House

Chairman, I wish to raise a concern regarding the timeframe of the process for the restoration of Parnham House.

To clarify, my question does not pertain to any specific planning application but instead focuses on the level of staffing, leadership and resources allocated to support the estate both within Dorset Council and other bodies such as Historic England as a consultative body.

Given the significant heritage value and the importance of ensuring progress, can you provide reassurances that sufficient resources and staff are in place to effectively manage and expedite this process?

Furthermore, what additional measures or resources can be considered to control and accelerate the restoration efforts as a whole?

And would the Portfolio holder meet with me and the owners of Parnham Park to agree a way forward in preserving the estate.

Response by Cllr Shane Bartlett

Parnham House is a grade I listed country house in extensive grounds, dating largely from the mid sixteenth century but in April 2017 it suffered a catastrophic fire which resulted in around 75% of the building being reduced to a shell. The Estate was subsequently sold in spring 2020 and the owner has restored parts of the building. The south wing remains in a very precarious state and is vulnerable to collapse due to it being unsupported and exposed to the elements. Officers have proactively sought to encourage the stabilisation of the building including recommending urgent construction of a wind and water tight scaffold to prevent further decay and ingress of water. Grant has been offered from Historic England towards this work, which has not been taken up to date.

It is, therefore, a challenging site where development which might not ordinarily be considered acceptable is being contemplated to facilitate restoration, and this is by

no means a simple or straightforward task. However, the Council has an experienced team with conservation, planning and other expertise to hand and good knowledge of the site. Throughout, officers have worked closely with Historic England and other agencies. The Council has also engaged an external consultant to review the viability and enabling development case of the development when applications for restoration of the building are submitted.

The Local Planning Authority has already approved various applications for planning permission and listed building consent at Parnham Park and has for some time advised the applicant to bring forward a masterplan for the entire estate and submit applications as soon as possible. We have also encouraged further pre-application advice from Dorset Council and other statutory consultees, including Historic England and the Environment Agency. This is important given the complexity of the proposed restoration and the likely very significant extent of enabling development within the Registered Park and Garden and Dorset National Landscape which is expected to be proposed to fund the restoration of the house.

The onus is on the owner to request further pre-application engagement, enter into a Planning Performance Agreement (should they wish to), submit an EIA Screening Request and make applications for the restoration of Parnham House.

I am happy to meet with Councillor Monks, the applicant and officers if you feel this would be helpful.

3. Question from Cllr Belinda Bawden - CTAP

Please could the Portfolio Holder for Place Services confirm when they are expecting to hear whether the Outline Business Case (OBC) for the Coastal Transition Accelerator Programme (CTAP) for Charmouth and Swanage has been successful, so when our local stakeholders, organisations and residents could be fully involved in shaping the priority proposals?

Response by Cllr Jon Andrews

We anticipate hearing from the Environment Agency in the next 2-3 weeks as to whether the business case has been successful, and if so, a subsequent paper will be taken to the December cabinet meeting seeking its support and approval.

4. Question from Cllr Belinda Bawden – Dorset COP

The three Dorset-wide environmental networks - [Zero Carbon Dorset](#), [Sustainable Dorset](#) and the [Dorset Climate Action Network](#) – recently held the second [Dorset COP](#) when over 300 organisations and individuals were able to hear inspiring stories of community-based climate and environmental actions, ideas and aspirations.

Here's what was reported in [Dorset View](#):

Hundreds of people attended Dorset's second community-led 'conference of the parties' – Dorset COP – which was held on Saturday 2 November at Bournemouth University. The University's new vice-chancellor, Professor Alison Honour, opened the event alongside Lois Betts, the University's sustainability manager, recently elected local MP, Jessica Toale, and the Dorset COP organisers.

Jessica Toale said:

"There is no more profound a challenge or driver of global instability than climate change. While the annual climate COPs are really important international conferences, we cannot tackle climate change without local, community-level action.

"That is why this local Dorset COP was such a brilliant event – bringing together local people, businesses and policymakers to look at what the big issues are and how to address them – from renewable energy and carbon capture to the circular economy and sustainable transport.

"I will be working with change makers here in Bournemouth West to address some of these huge challenges – including cleaning up our seas and rivers, moving us towards a zero-waste economy and ensuring nature's recovery."

While it was encouraging to see officers from the Sustainability and Electoral Services teams attending the COP, and the Low Carbon Dorset displays, "policymakers" from Dorset Council were in really short supply, even fewer than last year.

I'm happy to report that the perception of Dorset Council's action on climate change was marginally better than last year, according to those attending the Carbon Literacy workshop for town and parish councillors and community groups but this was from 0 last year to about 20% of the audience.

Given the clear, concerning and continuing disconnection between what Dorset Council is actually achieving and what some of the most engaged people in the county **think** we are doing, would it be possible for Dorset Council to undertake now to support next year's Dorset COP in Sturminster Newton with collaboration, communication and, crucially, participation?

[Dorset COP](#)

[Dorset Biz report](#)

[Dorset View report](#)

Response by Cllr Nick Ireland

- Our communities are integral to our journey to net zero – and it is notable that public concern about climate change is significantly higher in the South West than the national average. But the proactivity of our community networks and Dorset COP are a testament to how this is catalysing grassroots action.
- Officers tell me that this year's COP was another bustling and constructive day of discussion and debate – and I'm proud that they participated again this year, to once more showcase the significant work that the council is doing. They have told me how invaluable it is as a forum for us to engage and learn on how to push further and faster.
- We're continuing to do more to keep our residents informed of what the council is achieving. On top of our existing channels and activities, we've:
 - launched a new climate and nature newsletter,
 - recruited an officer to do more external engagement,
 - and started to reach out more to local councils and schools.
 - Throughout the summer and now into autumn, we've also been touring the 'Our journey to net zero' photo exhibition around the county. This inspiring collection of photos and stories highlights how our Low Carbon Dorset programme has been helping local businesses and communities prepare for a greener, more sustainable future. If anyone here hasn't already seen it, it's currently on display in the reception area of county hall so please do take a moment to look on your way out.
- The seriousness of our commitment to act on climate change is clear – both by my taking on this portfolio myself, and through its centrality to the Council Plan we will discuss today.
- I am therefore of course disappointed that I couldn't attend this year's event myself due to prior diary commitments, but I very much look forward to attending at Sturminster Newton next year once that date is determined.