

Full Council

5th December 2024

Questions submitted by Councillors

Question 1 – submitted by Cllr S Flower

Cabinet Update 10 October Full Council

We have fixed the five -year land supply position

The Planning Inspectorate has apparently reviewed the Dorset Council position and concluded that we could just about demonstrate a 5-year land supply again against our needs target, which is welcomed as it gives weight to our Local Plan Policies enabling us to determine where development goes and so protect our green belt and other undeveloped land against inappropriate development.

However, a note of caution. With a 5.02-year supply, this position is extremely precarious. There are concerns across both the private and corporate sectors regarding the extended times being taken to deal with even the most basic planning applications for new homes.

Service delivery performance was high on the agenda during the first five years of this council, and we are now seeing the rewards of that. However, anecdotal evidence since May 24 seems to suggest that unnecessary burdensome and overly bureaucratic processes are being applied, in serial fashion, when dealing with planning applications for new homes. For example, the burden of validation requirements is way above national requirements slowing down the submission of applications and straining small house builders and businesses trying to expand, impacting on the viability of local and national house builders on the delivery of vital housing and boosting the local economy.

Whilst the statistics regarding overall performance from Development Management may appear that targets are being met, do they disguise the length of time taken to grant each planning application that involves new homes? Of the 30% or so, of applications that are not determined within their statutory timeframe, how many of those are for new homes?

From the long list of requirements in the Validation Checklist, through to the change in the scheme of delegation pushing more applications through the Planning Committee process, these factors must surely have a negative impact on our knife edge housing land supply.

We surely need more granular performance statistics to make sure the service is running at full steam across all planning application types, especially for new homes, and across all geographical areas. Having a breakdown of performance will highlight areas for improvement rather than just saying we are 'exceeding expectations' across a broad range of planning application types and areas.

There have also been concerns from applicants about a notable increasing number of requested for extensions of time. This is of concern due to the inevitable increase in process

costs in determining planning applications and the inevitable impact on the delivery of much needed additional housing in the increasingly difficult market conditions.

I should add that my question is linked specifically to the process and not the performance of officers working in this service. It would seem, it's the process and application of policy guidance that's the issue, not the work ethic of our officers, which is in urgent need of reform.

Given the pressure on finances, it poses the question about the current average cost of processing planning applications for new homes which have been determined under delegated powers and those referred to planning committees for decision? I ask this question given the increased number of planning applications being referred to committee by the Chairmen of Area Planning Committees with limited justification, following policy changes introduced by the Liberal Democrat administration after the May Local Elections.

So, my question is. What action is being taken by the Liberal Democrat administration to maximise the on-time determination of planning applications, whilst the council has the benefit of a 5-year housing land supply. Noting of course the risk of not doing so will cause Dorset to see planning decisions by appeal with inappropriate housing development in our green belt and other undeveloped land ahead of Dorset Council publishing its first Dorset-Wide Local Plan.

Thank you, madam chairman

Question 2 – submitted by Cllr B Goringe

My ward, St Leonards & St Ives, has a population of 7600 residents, a higher population than towns such as Wareham, Beaminster, and Sturminster Newton. It also has the highest age range of residents over 66 years which at 39%, higher than the Dorset Average of 29%.

Our only bus service, No. 38 More bus, which runs from Ringwood to Ferndown, is crucial for an ageing population who don't have cars or driving licences. We also don't have an active Doctor's surgery in the ward.

Currently the last bus leaves Ferndown at 13:10 and Ringwood at 13:50 than the bus goes on to be used as the school run.

My residents who need to visit Poole or Bournemouth hospitals or their doctor's surgeries in either Ringwood or Ferndown and have afternoon appointments have no way of getting back home from Ferndown or Ringwood by bus. Their only option is a taxi at a cost of about £15 or to walk. The distance from Ferndown is nearly 4 miles or from Ringwood over 2 miles and at this time of the year this would be in the dark.

What are your plans to extend the No. 38 bus to say, 5pm, which will allow residents to get home safely.

I note that Dorset Council are about to receive or have received a government grant of 3.8 million for buses and travel. Can the Portfolio Holder for travel allocate some of these monies towards extending the No 38 bus service to 5pm Monday to Friday to allow my elderly residents to get home safely.

Question 3 – submitted by Cllr L O’Leary

In May the then fresh faced new cabinet member came down to Littlemoor to meet myself and Cllr Dickenson to discuss the issue of congestion along Littlemoor road. Now a badly placed island crossing has made the issue even worse. Can the cabinet member give me an update on plans to help solve this growing issue?

Question 4 – submitted by Cllr J Somper

Following the recent storms and high rainfall across my ward, I saw homes being flooded, erosion of riverbanks, and significant disruption to residents and road users.

It is clear that changing weather patterns will exacerbate these issues in the future, underscoring the urgent need for expertise and robust flood defences. This is not merely a matter of responding to immediate crises but of proactively safeguarding our communities against further harm.

My question for the Cabinet is regarding the prioritisation of budget allocation. Can assurances be given, not only to the residents I represent but also to those across the county who have faced similar challenges, that sufficient funding will be allocated to support communities severely affected by flooding? Additionally, I urge consideration of significant investment in long-term flood mitigation measures to protect villages such as Shroton and Fontmell Magna from the increasingly frequent and severe flooding events we are witnessing.

Question 5 – submitted by Cllr P Brown

Can the portfolio holder reassure me, the Council and, most importantly, our rural communities that not a single inch of Dorset Council’s County Farms will be sold off?

Thank you for the question this council recognises the very important role that the County Farm Estate has provided over 100 years in giving generations of new Dorset farmers a pathway to farming opportunities that may have been unavailable through conventional routes. I would also add that it is clear to me that the estate has been underinvested in leading to a backlog of maintenance issues hence the requirement for a detailed holistic review.

This asset class review of the council's farm estate in line with the approach set out in the newly adopted strategic asset management plan (approved by cabinet in October 2024) and is currently being undertaken. This will enable the consideration of current and alternative uses for all assets within the farm estate, ensuring the council is making best use of its farm estate and seizing opportunities to maximise financial and social return. The asset review process examines the cost and condition of the asset, with a key focus on the council's key priorities – providing high quality housing, growing our economy, communities for all, and responding to the climate and nature crisis.

A wide range of data is collated and analysed, including premises costs, tenure review, valuation, energy efficiency and carbon data, development potential and condition of the asset. Where the condition of an asset is poor and requires significant investment to ensure it is fit for purpose, it may be pragmatic to dispose of the asset and invest the capital into the remaining farm estate.

The asset review will result in a farms strategy for consideration by cabinet. The strategy will guide future decision making in relation to the farm estate. The Cabinet will take due regard to observations from the panel members of the reformed County Farms Advisory Panel who will meet in January to look at initial findings.

Question 6 – submitted by Cllr V Pothecary

We have been made aware that the Government Transport Secretary has allocated £83 million in funding into 2026 for the South West Councils.

The [investment](#) is said to ensure better bus services across the South West, for enhancing popular routes, protecting rural services and increasing bus use for shopping, socialising and commuting. It was also said that every region in England will benefit from the funding, but those areas which have been historically underserved are being particularly prioritised.

The South West allocation has been divided up as follows:

BCP	£ 6,016,436
Cornwall	£ 10,589,782
Devon	£ 11,615,699
Dorset	£ 3,815,959

To say that I was incredibly disappointed to read that Dorset Council has only been allocated £3.8million from the scheme is an understatement.

We all know that it costs far more to deliver any service in the rural areas and I wonder if anyone from our council has challenged the paltry sum that we will receive, in comparison to Devon's £11,616,699, a County very similar to ours in its rurality.

In Gillingham we are extremely fortunate to be on a main line railway station from London to Exeter. But, having arrived in the town, you are faced with very limited onward travel options. There is no service at all to Shaftesbury on Saturday or Sunday – to the jewel of tourism in the North of the county!

On weekdays you can travel to Shaftesbury and from there take the bus to Salisbury or Blandford Forum. From Blandford you can change bus and travel to the County town – although it's worth saying that it's almost impossible to do the return journey in the same day!

Occasionally we have buses arrive in Gillingham from Wiltshire – looking after their residents, who live over the border.

Most villages in the far north never see a bus – only school buses. There are no buses for work, or buses for further education.

Question

I would like to know the bidding criteria by which the money was allocated between the counties and how we only received such a miserly sum of £3.8 million – out of a total of £83 million? Furthermore, please could I receive assurances that this funding will see a real and tangible benefit to Gillingham, and the eight villages that I, and others, represent?

Lastly, In light of our devolution proposal I would like reassurance that this sort of situation will not/cannot happen in the future!

Question 7 – submitted by Cllr B Quayle

In 2021, following an alarming amount of local wildlife fatalities, I was approached by a local wildlife organisation regarding warning signs being installed to raise awareness.

Unfortunately, I was advised that permission was needed by Central Government before Dorset Council would be able to facilitate such a policy.

Dorset Council received authorisation giving the council regulatory permission to use the small wild animals' signs from the Secretary of State for Transport on the 22nd of December 2023. Given that Dorset Council has declared a Nature Emergency, and considering that several local animal welfare organisations have offered to cover the installation costs, can the Cabinet Member for Highways clarify why a policy has not yet been established to allow the installation of hedgehog signs on the highway?

Question 8 – submitted by Cllr B Quayle

The Royal British Legion estimates that over 10,000 local benefit awards per year involve military compensation, with four out of five councils treating this compensation as income.

Could the responsible cabinet member confirm if Dorset Council delivers any local benefits or grants that consider military service compensation when determining eligibility? If so, which local benefits or grants, and is there any intention to revisit these policies?

Question 9 – submitted by Cllr B Trite

Since

(1) the high demand to attend the public inquiry into the Sandbanks Ferry Company's increased charges application has been given as the reason for the inquiry being re-located away from Studland Village Hall; and

(2) the new venue selected for the revised date is in Poole rather than in Purbeck; while

(3) the people who will clearly be most disadvantaged if the application is successful are mainly resident in Purbeck;

will Dorset Council apply its best efforts to having the public inquiry moved back into Purbeck, where there are at least four venues of a suitable size and quality to facilitate the inquiry, even in the unlikely event that a further postponement of the inquiry's commencement were necessary?