

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

Response by Cllr S Bartlett

As set out in the member's question, the Planning Inspectorate confirmed in September this year that Dorset Council can demonstrate a Housing Land Supply of 5.02 years. The Inspector's Report states that the Council is entitled to rely on this position until 31 October 2025, in accordance with national planning policy and guidance, and the statement is a material consideration in the determination of applications and appeals.

However, it is also correct that the supply is only just over five years. If the nationally proposed increases to housing targets come into effect, then at the end of the fixed period (after 31 October 2025), the Council will have a very much reduced housing land supply, until the adoption of the new local plan. As such, we need to consider the benefits of providing housing alongside other benefits of a scheme, and any adverse impacts, in making decisions on applications for housing and may consider that some developments should be approved despite being contrary to policies in the current local plans.

As members will be aware, the planning service has worked to significantly improve the proportion of non-major applications which are determined within 8 weeks since the formation of Dorset Council in 2019.

Whilst the Council does seek to minimise the use of extensions of time in general, there are cases where these can be mutually beneficial to the Council and applicants. For example extensions of time can be used to allow for submission of amended plans which may overcome potential reasons for refusal, and which may improve the overall quality of the development; and to allow completion of section 106 agreements to secure financial contributions and other obligations which are required to make the development acceptable in planning terms. The Council has very clear guidance on our approach to negotiation on amended plans to minimise unnecessary delays to applications.

In some cases, extensions of time are also used to allow time for referral to the planning committee where this is required following the scheme of delegation. The Council updated the scheme of delegation in July this year, but it remains the case that most applications are determined by officers under delegated powers. 97% of applications were determined under delegated powers in Quarter 2 this year, which is broadly comparable with the quarterly figures over the past 2 years (between 96% and 98% of applications determined under delegated powers).

The Council is taking a number of steps to support timely decision-making and facilitate housing delivery:

- The validation checklist sets out the information required to be submitted with a planning application. The current validation checklist was adopted on 1 October 2022 and has been regularly updated since then to reflect changes in national legislation and local requirements. The checklist is now due a further, comprehensive, review, and officers will be undertaking this review in the coming months. The aim of the review will be to identify any opportunities to streamline the information requirements, whilst still ensuring that sufficient information is submitted at the outset to enable proper consideration and assessment of each planning application, and to avoid delays at the decision-making stage due to missing information.
- The Council offers a comprehensive pre-application advice service, which can help identify issues at an early stage, which can then be addressed before an application is submitted, hence facilitating prompt decision-making at the application stage. Officers promoted the benefits of using the pre-application advice service at a recent virtual agents forum, attended by around 200 planning agents who operate across Dorset.
- The Council has submitted six sites through the New Homes Accelerator Call for Sites, seeking expertise, assistance and resources from Government to help overcome barriers to delivery of homes.
- The Council is using funding secured through the Local Nutrient Mitigation Fund to deliver nutrient mitigation credits in the Poole Harbour catchment, helping to bolster the supply of credits in this catchment and therefore enabling planning

consents to be issued with pre-commencement conditions to ensure nutrient mitigation is provided before development starts on site. Officers are currently working towards the release of the first Dorset Council nutrient mitigation credits early in 2025.

- Officers will also be reviewing sites currently included within the 5-year housing land supply to identify any barriers to delivery of housing on these sites, and any actions the Council may be able to take to help facilitate successful delivery.

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

Response by Cllr J Andrews

Dorset Council welcomes the additional bus funding announced by central government. We are awaiting the offer letter to set out the conditions on how this money can be spent.

This funding will help us to deliver improved bus services and infrastructure aligned with our new council plan priorities and strategic bus priorities set out within the Bus Service Improvement Plan. However, the £1.3m revenue funding and £2m capital is only a small part of what we will require to transform the bus network across Dorset.

We are working closely with our local bus operators to make improvements. The 38 is a commercial bus service and any changes will need to be discussed and agreed with the bus company who operate this service.

I have set up a Public Transport EAP and this cross-party group will be reporting its recommendations to the Place and Resources Overview Committee in 2025, once it has completed its review work.

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?"

Response by Cllr J Andrews

The pedestrian refuge island crossing installed as part of the Lovells development to the north of Littlemoor Road is well placed to promote sustainable transport from the development. The crossing is on the pedestrian and cyclists desire lines from the development to access the local services and beyond. The locations were assessed during the planning process and have received planning permission. The crossings are uncontrolled and located to maintain lane widths along Littlemoor Road. The only impact on vehicular traffic is when a driver chooses to slow or stop to allow a pedestrian or cyclist to cross the road.

The development also benefits from a Travel Plan to promote sustainable travel modes to the new residents.

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.

Response by Cllr J Andrews

The primary source of capital funding for reducing the risk of internal flooding to residential properties is via individual bids to Defra. Some named storms may attract central government funding via Flood Recovery Grants, but this also tends to be focused on more urban areas which have higher numbers of properties affected.

A viable and sustainable flood scheme needs to be identified, which is a challenge for the more rural communities which have relatively small numbers of dispersed affected properties with complex multiple flooding sources. Homeowners can look to protect their own properties by installing property flood resilience measures such as doorway flood boards, water resistant doors, vent covers and fixed pumps.

Our Flood Risk Management Team has a role in investigating flooding incidents and identifying sustainable flood risk reduction measures to support long term community resilience. Flooding in rural areas can be complex and needs careful assessment by working with other organisations. Sources can range from groundwater, surface water, blocked watercourses, or a combination thereof.

In relation to highways, the majority of funding for improvements to highway infrastructure comes from central government through the Department for Transport. Full details of Dorset's Highway funding allocation are expected following the government's Spring statement. We anticipate an increase in funding levels, with climate resilience being a factor in that additional funding.

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?

Response by Cllr R Biggs

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 Potheary

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!

Response by Cllr J Andrews

The allocation of £3.8 million has not been received as a result of a bidding process, but has been allocated to authorities according to a national needs based formula. The details of the formula have not been provided to us. As with other formula-based allocations, Dorset fares badly in relation to other neighbouring authorities. This issue has been raised repeatedly through elected members and senior officers with Government including during a session with the Transport Select Committee on 25th January 2023 where Cllr. Ray Bryan gave evidence. We will make a commitment to continue to raise the issue of fair funding for Dorset.

The consultant reviewing authorities' Bus Service Improvement Plans recently praised Dorset's revised plan. However, the content of the BSIP does not currently influence the amount of grant received through the formula process. The BSIP sets out our ambitions for improved bus services and infrastructure across Dorset. The £3.8 million will be used to improve the bus network using the priorities identified in the BSIP. We are engaging operators as part of our Enhanced Partnership to deliver the elements of the BSIP that will provide most benefit to residents in the long term.

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?

Response by Cllr J Andrews

Thank you for the question and the opportunity to reinforce my commitment to the Council's Nature Emergency declaration.

On December 22, 2023, Dorset Council received regulatory permission from the Secretary of State for Transport to use 'small wild animals' signs under sections 63 and 65 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984.

This authorisation permits the Council to erect these signs with the primary objective of improving road safety and contributing to wildlife preservation by alerting drivers to the presence of small wild animals, such as hedgehogs, in certain areas.

As the Council has a prescriptive power to use these signs, a distinct policy is not required. However, we do need to adopt a strategic approach to implementation involving Town and Parish Council's and local animal welfare organisations. We must ensure that there is adequate balance and control to enable the correct sites to be identified and prioritised, and to comply with the aspirations of the Council's Rural Roads Protocol. When considering any sign, we need to conserve the outstanding quality of Dorset's landscape and settlements, while delivering a safe and convenient highway network.

A trial of the new hedgehog signage has been undertaken, with signs erected in Lyme Regis. Following on from the trial, the criteria for wider implementation of small animal signage is being prepared, ready for more signs to go up in the new year.

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?

Response by Cllr S Clifford

The question from Cllr Quayle asks if Dorset Council considers military service compensation when determining eligibility for local benefits or grants, and if there are plans to revisit these policies.

I can confirm that:

- **Council Tax Support:** we fully disregard War Pensioner Income/compensation under this scheme, which is reviewed annually.
- **Housing benefit** is administered by our revenue and benefits teams on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), with assessment criteria set at a national level, not locally.
- **Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP):** Funding is limited and provided largely by the DWP. Applications are assessed on a case-by-case basis, considering all household income, including military compensation, measured against household expenditure. Discretion is applied by our assessment teams and policy reviewed on a regular basis.
- **Disabled Facilities Grants:** The statutory criteria is also set at a national level which means that means testing includes some military compensation benefits.

However, the Council has discretion and plans to exclude Military Compensation Awards from future assessments./.

- **Housing Allocations Policy:** Excludes lump sum payments received by Armed Forces members as compensation for injury or disability from the financial resource limit.

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?

Response by Cllr J Andrews

Officers are working closely with Swanage Town Council, BCP and local Parish Councils responding to the Sandbanks Ferry Inquiry. Representations have been made to the Inspector regarding the location of the public inquiry. The Inspector requested that the applicant find a suitable venue and explore several of the venues proposed by the local community, including the Mowlem Theatre, Baptist Church and Springfield Hotel. For operational reasons these have been deemed unsuitable for an inquiry of this size and nature.

The public notice has now been issued and confirms that the inquiry will commence at 10am on Tuesday 21st January 2025 at the Poole Harbour Commissioners Terminal North Lounge. An evening session is being held on Wednesday 22nd January 2025 commencing at 6.30pm in the Springfield Country Hotel in Wareham. I'm also advised that all Inquiry sessions will be live streamed, and recordings will be available for subsequent viewing.