

## **Full Council**

**11<sup>th</sup> February 2025**

### **Public Participation**

#### **Question 1 – submitted by Mr R Thomas, Chair, Sustainable Shaftesbury Advisory Committee to Shaftesbury Town Council, Member, Dorset Climate Action Network**

A previous Dorset Council unanimously agreed to note the proposal for a Dorset National Park and the evidence for it, and to keep it under review, stating that: "The proposal for a National Park could potentially support Dorset Council's corporate outcomes in relation to a healthy and prosperous Dorset."

In recent years, the Dorset National Park team community interest company (CIC) has further developed a strong and well-evidenced case for an extended Dorset National & Marine Park (DNMP) which would be England's first to coordinate action across the joined-up ecosystems of land, coast and sea. The DNMP team has stated it would like to 'work in close partnership with Dorset Council and local communities to help address the climate and nature emergencies, care for and improve the environment, people's health and wellbeing, and benefit our communities, environment and economy throughout Dorset.'

Following the DNMP team's submission to Natural England and to the government-appointed Glover Review of Designated Landscapes, whose 2019 report recommended that Dorset be 'seriously considered' for National Park status, will the new administration confirm its commitment to supporting the creation of Dorset as Britain's first combined land and sea national park in the full knowledge that the proposal has the cross-party support of many town and parish councils throughout Dorset as well as Dorset CPRE, Dorset Wildlife Trust and most other environmental and nature conservation charities and organisations in Dorset, and will it also now press the new Government for an early decision on the creation of such an exciting and pioneering entity in Dorset?

#### **Response from Cllr N Ireland**

Thank you for your question. Dorset Council is committed to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty within our National Landscapes as well as the Outstanding Universal Value of our Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. We are also actively working to promote nature recovery and to address the climate and ecological emergency through our plans, programmes and well-established partnerships, which stretch across many organisations and community groups. This includes engaging with the Marine Management Organisation on addressing local marine nature recovery. This Council has set out its strategic priorities and will continue to engage in initiatives where these demonstrably add value in helping us to deliver better outcomes for Dorset and its communities.



## Question 2 – submitted by Mr A Bailey

For the first time, the Dorset Council's budget will be hitting a record £416 million—nearly £1.2 million per day (1). I could dwell on the penny-pinching of new evening parking charges, despite election promises to reduce costs. Instead, let's focus on where our money is really going (2) from the pennies to the pounds, and then the big ticket item.

Monthly, Dorset Council spends tens of thousands on agency staff, yet smaller sums are just as eyebrow-raising. £3,000 was handed to ACTIVIST GROUP LIMITED in December 2024 for a Director's Office—reminiscent of a Boris-like Downing Street refurb, I wonder (3). In July, £51,000 went to CARE DORSET LIMITED for fireworks, oddly categorised as "Health & Safety"—supposedly a lavish show at the taxpayers' expense. In April and August, UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS DORSET got £72,000 for "Smoking & Tobacco" with little explanation. One can only hope this isn't funding smoking breaks!

In June, the council forked out £400,000 (4) to BERYL BIKES who supplied 121 e-bikes, only for the firm to partly pull out this month (5). October saw £840,000 spent on snow management from AEBI SCHMIDT UK LTD; despite just a light dusting of January snow, gritters were out at 8:30 PM last Wednesday in 7-degree weather. Wouldn't expanding contracts with local farmers have been a more practical solution. Then, in September, NEWTON CONSULTING LTD bagged £400,000 for Adult Social Care consultancy, adding to the £14.5 million already spent yearly—nearly 3% of that budget!

There's much more to scrutinise. The big ticket item is CARE DORSET LIMITED (6), with six highly paid directors and costing £2.3 million per month, alongside agency staff spending. Wouldn't it be more cost-effective to contract private care homes per bed rather than run services in-house, avoiding costs like pensions, HR, administration, and the overheads of owning six properties. The Guardian (7) notes 84% of care home beds in England are privately owned, highlighting the sector's dominance.

To my question: Nearly £340,000 has been spent over nine months on internal audits with SOUTH WEST AUDIT PARTNERSHIP LIMITED. While internal audits serve a purpose, they are ultimately conducted by an organisation working closely with the council. Will the Cabinet commit to commissioning an independent external financial audit to effectively address wasteful and unnecessary spending?

Such an audit should be fully transparent to the public, going beyond a routine review of figures to scrutinise the **justification** behind spending decisions. It should ask *why* certain expenditures were made, whether they delivered genuine value for money, and how future financial decisions can be more accountable. A truly independent review would help rebuild public trust and ensure that every penny is spent wisely.

## References

1. <https://www.dorsetecho.co.uk/news/24845258.dorset-council-job-losses-maximum-rise-council-tax-expected/>
2. <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/w/payments-to-suppliers-over-500>
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-56878663>
4. <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/news/beryl-e-bike-share-launch-in-weymouth-on-20-august>
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9d5qgzl8l2o>
6. <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/13873953>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/sep/19/84-of-care-home-beds-in-england-owned-by-private-firms>

## Response from Cllr S Clifford

"Thank you for your question Mr Bailey and for your commitment to monitoring Council finances, as the Council is spending public funds, it is crucial that we all play our part in ensuring funds are used appropriately and achieve value for money.

Before turning to your question, I must attend to some of the areas where your interpretation of spend is inaccurate.

1. Activist Group assisted with a review of the operating model for the Dorset Innovation Park. Their website gives examples of the type of work they are typically engaged in.
2. The payments to Care Dorset are described on the report as "Fire Works" not fireworks. These are correctly categorised as health and safety as they relate to fire warden cover to continue to keep our residents safe.
3. The payments to University Hospitals Dorset referring to smoking & tobacco are not to fund smoking breaks. The payment is for a smoking cessation programme.
4. £840k to Aebi Schmidt UK Ltd was part of vehicle replacement i.e. buying gritters. Gritters are deployed when cold weather is forecast and where possible in a preventative manner where there is a forecast that temperatures will drop to the threshold of +0.5C.
5. The 6 directors listed for Care Dorset are employed in a non-executive directors.

Hopefully providing this additional information provides some reassurance and serves as a reminder of the subjective nature of expenditure.

Turning to your question seeks an independent view of Council Finances, and in particular an independent view on wasteful spending - in essence, where value for money to the taxpayer has not been achieved.

I can confirm that through the Public Sector Audit Appointment Appointments (PSAA) the Council appoints its external Auditors, Grant Thornton UK LLP, to undertake the external audit. This includes a full audit of the Council's statement of accounts and also reports on the Council's arrangements for Value for Money. Grant Thornton are scheduled to present their findings later this month at the Audit & Governance Committee on 24 February 2025 and I would encourage you to review these once published in the week prior to the meeting.

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