

Cabinet – 9 September 2025

Councillor Questions

1. Question from Cllr C Monks

Residents have expressed significant concern to me over the recent reduction in services on the X51 and X53 bus routes, which are vital for connectivity in our area. Can the portfolio holder clarify the rationale behind these changes, and will he intervene to ensure that these essential services are improved rather than reduced?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Place Services

Thank you, Cllr Monks, for your question regarding the X51 and X53 bus routes. I understand the concerns raised by residents about the winter timetables on these routes, which are essential for connecting communities across West Dorset. To clarify, the X51 and X53 are operated as commercial services run by First Bus. Each winter, First introduces a reduced timetable, as has been their long-standing practice. In recent years the bus company has requested financial assistance from Dorset Council to maintain services through the winter months. This year, First Bus requested a significantly higher amount, an increase that Dorset Council could not support due to the sharp rise in cost and limited public funding available. To keep the route going through the winter, Council officers worked quickly with First to revise the route and operating pattern. These changes reduced costs and helped improve the long-term viability of the service, not just for the winter period, but with improvements for the Weymouth area throughout the year. It's important to note that this was not a council decision. Timetables for commercial services are set by the operator. The Council can only influence them when public funding is involved, and even then, we are constrained by available resources and the operator's legal obligations, such as driver hours and rest periods. We are currently investigating with First how improved connections with train services at Axminster, particularly the 7:35 service to Exeter, can be achieved. We will also continue to engage with local groups and stakeholders to monitor the winter services. Looking ahead, First Bus has agreed to start planning earlier for next year's service and to work more closely with the council and the community to ensure the service reflects local needs as far as possible. However, it's important to recognise that the Government does not currently provide the level of bus funding required to deliver the kind of rural bus services that residents in Dorset rightly expect and deserve. Thank you again for raising this important issue.

2. Question from Cllr L O'Leary

The junctions coming onto Littlemoor Road continue to grow in congestion made worse by an increase in housing and due to be made worse by more holiday caravans in nearby Preston and New proposed homes within the local plan. On busy periods of the day residents are subjected to a lengthy wait that is increasing the busier the area gets.

What steps will the council take to relieve this measure and what steps have been taken since this issue was raised at previous meetings by both myself and Cllr Peter Dickenson?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Place Services

The transport assessment for the approved 500 dwellings to the north of Littlemoor Road included both the junctions of Louviers Road with Littlemoor Road. This identified that no improvement works were required. We have kept the junctions under review as people move into the new houses and will continue to monitor the junctions as the development continues.

3. Question from Cllr L O'Leary

Aster are currently selling off two former social houses on Littlemoor and have sold one already this year. These are well built sturdy large family homes that housed long term residents for many years and hold many fond family memories within them. Aster claim these are sold off due to the upkeep and then re-invested in new homes. However, these homes do not appear to be in the same area as those sold. Many of my residents wait years on the housing register and have the double hit of watching family homes they could fill be sold off and then when housing is offered it is normally miles away from their family friends and community. This policy by Aster is breaking up and watering down working-class communities such as mine by splitting up families and moving people miles from their home neighbourhoods.

Will the council formally write to Aster imploring them to review this policy and put communities at the heart of their decision making?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Health and Housing

Thank you, Cllr O'Leary, for raising this important issue. I share your concern, and I'm actively pursuing it at a senior level with Aster Housing.

Aster is the largest Registered Provider in the Dorset Council area, managing over 7,000 tenancies and delivering a major development programme of new homes in our area. Their role in delivering and developing affordable homes is vital — but so is making sure those homes remain in the communities that need them most. That's why I'm challenging the pattern and number of sales, in areas such as Littlemoor, where larger family homes are being lost and not always replaced locally.

This Council relies on Registered Providers like Aster to meet housing need and tackle homelessness. Although we understand that some homes may be sold when refurbishment is unviable, the concentration of sales in certain areas—without equivalent local replacement — is deeply concerning. This issue has been raised not only by residents but also by councillors across **all political parties** through our Housing Member Group.

Aster does build more homes than it sells in Dorset, and we value that. But we need to see a more balanced approach—one that protects community interests and reflects local housing needs.

In June, I met with Aster's senior leadership, alongside our Corporate Director for Housing, Andrew Billany, following a formal letter outlining our concerns. This was a frank and robust meeting, so please be assured that I asserted the Council's position fairly and firmly. I've since written again, urging them to review their disposal policies and involve the Council in shaping a more community-focused approach. I'm pressing for a date for the promised follow-up meeting with me and will ensure your concerns—and those from other Members—are part of that conversation.

Thank you again for raising this. I've made Aster aware that this important issue is being raised here today and have shared your question with them. I'll keep you and other interested Members updated as we push for progress.