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CABINET

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 9 OCTOBER 2025

Present: Cllrs Nick Ireland (Chair), Richard Biggs (Vice-Chair), Jon Andrews, Shane Bartlett, Simon Clifford, Ryan Hope, Steve Robinson, Clare Sutton, Gill Taylor and Ben Wilson

Apologies: None

Also present: Cllr Piers Brown, Cllr Simon Christopher, Cllr Peter Dickenson, Cllr Les Fry, Cllr Sherry Jespersen, Cllr Louie O'Leary, Cllr Andrew Parry and Cllr Jane Somper

Also present remotely: Cllr Belinda Bawden, Cllr Laura Beddow, Cllr Ray Bryan, Cllr Jon Orrell, Cllr Scott Florek, Cllr Barry Goringe, Cllr Jill Haynes, Cllr Sally Holland, Cllr Jack Jeanes, Cllr Paul Kimber, Cllr David Morgan, Cllr David Northam, Cllr Byron Quayle, Cllr Kate Wheller and Cllr Sarah Williams

Officers present (for all or part of the meeting):
Andrew Billany (Corporate Director for Housing), Jan Britton (Executive Director - Place), Nina Coakley (Head of Change), Lisa Cotton (Corporate Director for Customer and Cultural Services), Sean Cremer (Corporate Director for Finance and Commercial), Kate Critchel (Senior Democratic & Governance Services Officer), Sam Crowe (Director of Public Health), Paul Dempsey (Executive Director of People - Children), Steven Ford (Corporate Director for Strategy, Performance and Sustainability), Julia Ingram (Corporate Director for Adult Social Care Operations), Jane Maclennan, Sam Poole (Interim Corporate Director for Commissioning & Improvement), Rachel Partridge (Deputy Director of Public Health), Andrew Galpin (Infrastructure & Delivery Planning Manager), Jessica Maskrey (Head of Service – Assets & Property) and Steven March (Service Manager for Housing Standards)

Officers present remotely (for all or part of the meeting):
David Haynes (Senior Rural Estates Suveyor) and Jonathan Price (Executive Director of People - Adults and Housing)

49. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 September 2025 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

50. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest to report.

51. **Public Participation**

There were two questions and two statements received from the public. A copy of the full questions and the detailed responses are set out in Appendix 1 of these minutes.

52. **Questions from Councillors**

There were no questions from Councillors to be considered at this meeting.

53. **Forward Plan**

The draft Cabinet Forward Plan for November 2025 was received and noted.

54. **Dorset Council Transformation Investment Update: Our Future Council**

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Development and Transformation set out a comprehensive update on Dorset Council's transformation programme, Our Future Council (OFC).

The update included a funding request of £12.4 million to support planned technology developments, specifically relating to the customer hub automation and the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) programme. The report also reaffirmed the council's commitment to delivering a whole-council operating model, supported by phased investment, enabling technologies, and strengthened governance. Cabinet was asked to approve the next phase of investment to support delivery of modern, efficient, and sustainable services.

In response to questions, the Cabinet Member for Corporate Development and Transformation advised that the Member Steering Group played a key role in reviewing decisions emerging from the Design Authority, ensuring that member input into the customer aspect of the transformation programme were designed effectively for the organisation. The Corporate Director confirmed that the Design Authority was officer-led with broad representation across the organisation for service design, workforce planning and organisational development supporting a "one council approach". The Cabinet Member also confirmed that despite some changes in strategy the redundancy timetable remained on track.

Whilst external support was required initially, the aim was to reduce reliance on third parties over time by developing sustainable in-house expertise. In reinforcing the importance of this approach, the Chief Executive, highlighted that as a modern, technology-dependant organisation, Dorset Council must invest in growing its own skills and capacity, to ensure long term sustainability beyond the life of the programme.

In response to a question regarding the budget process, the Chief Executive confirmed that the budget process would be aligned with the investment plan, the OFC programme and the implementation of the ERP system, which was essential to achieving a clear financial line of sight. She also noted that the budget process should be used to uncover opportunities for transformation which might be delivered by OFC in the future.

It was proposed by Cllr B Wilson and seconded by Cllr S Clifford

Decision

(a) That the update for Our Future Council including commitment to the financial and strategic context for transformation following initial consultation, be noted.

(b) That the high-level delivery plan, enabling Dorset Council to continue delivering critical improvements, modernising services, and preparing the organisation for future challenges and opportunities, be noted.

(c) That the use of reserves to fund the investment of £12.4m in 2025/26, be approved:

- £7.93m in H2 2025/26 plus additional procurement costs which must be committed to up-front totalling £4.47m.
- Allocation of budget required as detailed in section 6 of the report to Cabinet 9 October 2025, released incrementally every 6 months. This includes investment required for internal and external capacity and skills, delivery of technology including Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), contact centre, automation and AI and corporate bookings.

The incremental release required for October 2025 to March 2026 is:

- ERP: £1.65m plus commitment to 3 years procurement costs for SI and licensing of product to the value of £2.98m (out of a total of £14.23m over 3 years).
- Contact Centre: £1.55m plus commitment to software licencing to the value of £0.99m and contracting of product team to the value of £0.5m (out of a total of £5.64m over 3 years).
- Extension of existing automation technology, Ui path: £0.057m (out of a total of £0.25m over 3 years).
- Whole council booking solution: £0.075m (£0.385m over 3 years).
- Internal resource: £2.1m for Transformation Management Office.
- Redundancy costs: £2.5m for voluntary and compulsory redundancies

(d) That authority be delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Transformation and Corporate Development and Section 151 Officer to procure and award contracts for the following (within the budget defined in paragraph 1.3 and section 6 of the Cabinet report to 9 October 2025):

- Strategic implementation partner for Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) at a total contract value of £2.1m, licensing costs of the new product to a total value of £0.98m
- Digital product team for contact centre of £0.5m for H2 2025/26 and commitment up front to £0.99m in licensing costs over 3 years.

(e) That the strengthened governance and leadership arrangements, with regular engagement, leadership, and oversight provided by the Chief

Executive, Cabinet, and the wider Members Steering Group, supported by the Design Authority, be noted.

(f) That investment requests, be made to Cabinet every six months as needed and as set out at section 4.3 of the Cabinet report of 9 October 2025, be agreed, with monthly monitoring by the cross-party Members Transformation Steering Group including:

- Delivery progress
- Evidence of benefits realisation and substantiated savings
- An updated request for the next investment increment, aligned to programme milestones

Reason for the decision

To confirm Dorset Council's transformation strategy, reaffirming our commitment to delivering Our Future Council as a whole-council, cross-cutting programme. This approach reflects the revised financial and strategic context and builds on the significant progress made over the past year.

55. **Children's Services, Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services - Post Inspection Update**

The Cabinet Member for Children Services, Education and Skills reminded members that following Ofsted's ILACS inspection in March, Dorset's Children's Services were rated Outstanding overall with care leavers graded Good. Strong progress was being made with the Post Inspection Action Plan, especially enhancing support for care experienced young people and young parents.

The report also provided assurance that the Council would continue to learn, improve, and deliver for Dorset's children and families.

It was proposed by Cllr C Sutton and seconded by Cllr S Robinson

Decision

That the Post Inspection Action Plan be received and noted.

Reason for the decision

Dorset Council had a statutory duty to deliver effective safeguarding services and improve outcomes for children in care and care experienced young people. The impact of an effective Children's Services contributed to the 'communities for all' priority in the Council Plan.

The report provided assurance that Children's Services were continuing to learn from inspections and improve services to the communities of Dorset.

56. **Aspire Adoption Annual Report**

Cabinet received the annual report from Aspire Adoption, the Regional Adoption Agency for Dorset and BCP Councils. The report outlined key achievements including improved adoption timeliness, increased adoption orders and effective post-adoption support.

Cabinet members were asked to note the report as evidence of Aspire's continued high-standard delivery of statutory adoption services.

Noted

That the Aspire Adoption annual report 2024/25 be received and noted.

Reason for the note

Dorset Council had a duty under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to establish and maintain an adoption service for its area. Dorset Council along with BCP Council discharges this duty through a delegation of functions to Aspire Adoption, a Regional Adoption Agency.

57. **Get Dorset and BCP Working Plan**

The Cabinet Member for Property & Assets and Economic Growth outlined the Council's role in leading the regional implementation of the national "Get Britain Working" initiative, which aimed to boost employment and reduce economic inactivity through a joint plan with BCP Council, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Integrated Care Board.

In response to questions regarding funding, members were advised that the Council had received £125,000 from central government to pull together this work and a range of further works which would go on beyond the initial project. The Chamber of Commerce had also been commissioned to assist with delivering the project through the local skills and innovation partnership.

It was proposed by Cllr R Biggs and seconded by Cllr C Sutton

Decision

(a) That the draft 'Get Dorset and BCP Working Plan', be approved for publication.

(b) That authority be delegated to the Executive Director for Place, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Property, Assets and Economic Growth and Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education, and Skills, to undertake any minor changes to the Working Plan needed during its lifetime.

(c) That authority be delegated to the Executive Director for Place, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Property, Assets and Economic Growth and Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education, and Skills, to assign any remaining funding from the Government allocation to deliver outcomes identified in the Get Dorset and BCP Working Plan.

(d) That the Connect to Work Plan, be approved.

(e) That authority be delegated to the Executive Director for Place, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Property, Assets and Economic Growth and Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education, and Skills, to undertake any minor changes to the Connect to Work Plan needed during its lifetime.

Reason for the decision

The Get Dorset and BCP Working Plan**,** and supporting Connect to Work programme, would enable Dorset Council to help address challenges related to labour market participation and progression.

In addition to being a government requirement, development and implementation of the Plan would help realise key ambitions of the Council's Plan and supporting Economic Growth Strategy and Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion Strategy, particularly around productivity, investment and skills needed for both today's economy and the proposed future expansion of key sectors including clean energy.

58. **Dorset Council - Farms Estate Strategy**

Cabinet received a report proposing a new 10-year strategy for the management of Dorset Council's Farms Estate. The strategy set out a refreshed vision for the estate, building on the previous 2016–2021 plan and aligning with the Council's Strategic Asset Management Plan adopted in October 2024. The Farms Estate was recognised as an asset that contributed to Dorset's rural economy, environmental goals, and community wellbeing. The strategy aimed to ensure the estate was managed sustainably, supported new entrants into farming, and delivered long-term benefits for residents and the wider environment.

The Cabinet Member for Property & Assets and Economic Development thanked the members of the Farms Executive Advisory Panel for their involvement and support in producing the strategy.

The Leader of the Council advised that the Chairman of the Dorset Tenant Farmers Association had submitted a statement in respect of the item, and this had been published with the agenda papers.

Most members who addressed Cabinet supported the report and the strategy attached to it. However, concerns were expressed about the potential future disposal of any part of the farm estate and the need that important financial investment wouldn't be met. The Cabinet Member confirmed that capital receipts could not be ring-fenced, but a business case would be submitted for any identified investments needed within the farm estate. This would be considered alongside other competing priorities.

In response to questions about food security, the Cabinet Member advised that as part of the Council Plan, the Council had an aspiration that 70% of Council Farms would be managed using sustainable farming practices that balance food production and nature by 2030.

Decision

That the Farms Estate Strategy be adopted for a ten-year period, enabling the Council to deliver a structured, sustainable, and future-focused approach to the management of its agricultural holdings.

Reason for the decision

The previous strategy expired in 2021, and the need for a new framework had been crystallised by changes in national agricultural policy and the Council's adoption of the Strategic Asset Management Plan. The new strategy provided clarity of purpose, aligned with statutory obligations under the Agriculture Act 1970, and supported the Council's wider ambitions for economic growth, environmental stewardship, and community development.

59. **Developer contribution funding for community facilities at Mampitts Green, Shaftesbury**

The Cabinet Member for Planning and Emergency Planning outlined a progress report for the Mampitts Green community facilities project in Shaftesbury, for which s106 developer contribution funding had previously been conditionally awarded. Cabinet was asked to approve the extension of key milestones and the release of up to 10% of the total award to enable the Town Council to progress to the technical design stage.

In response to a question, the Cabinet Member for Planning and Emergency Planning confirmed that officers would continue to liaise with the Town Council and their project management representatives to address the requirement of the project.

It was proposed by Cllr S Bartlett and seconded by Cllr N Ireland.

Decision

Part 1 – That the previously set timescale milestone for the award of s106 funding to Shaftesbury Town Council, be extended as follows:

(a) That the timescale condition requiring the completion of all necessary information required by condition, extended to 9 June 2026.

(b) That the commencement of work on-site, extended to: 9 July 2026

That the appraisal of further information required by the conditions be agreed by the Head of Planning in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Emergency Planning, and any subsequent transfer of funds (and land) be made under the relevant officer delegation in accordance with the s106 protocol process. Failure to comply with either milestone extension would result in referral to Cabinet for further consideration.

Part 2 – That provision for up to 10% of the current total award value of £919,563 be available for early drawdown prior to the new milestone deadlines, to support the recovery of costs to-date and future expenditure relating to the refinement of the design.

Any further expenditure which required payment via the early draw down must be agreed in advance with Dorset Council. To ensure that the amount spent against the10% early drawdown was monitored and not exceeded.

Reason for the decision

To increase the level of flexibility in the award of s106 funding to Shaftesbury Town Council to support delivery of important community infrastructure at Mampitts Green, Shaftesbury.

60. **Empty Homes Strategy**

The Cabinet Member for Health and Housing set out the proposal to adopt Dorset Council's Empty Homes Strategy, which set out a formal approach to bringing long-term empty properties back into use. The strategy supported the Council's Housing Strategy and wider corporate objectives and included both advisory and enforcement tools.

In presenting the recommendations, the Cabinet Member advised that the People and Health Overview Committee's recommendation to maintain the strategy's budget and increase staffing capacity was noted and would be considered during the budget planning process.

In response to a question about turning empty business properties into homes, the Cabinet Member agreed to investigate this idea. In response to a further comment, the Executive Director for Place advised that officers collaborated to align work on policies and strategies, to ensure that economic and housing strategies are not produced in isolation of each other.

It was proposed by Cllr G Taylor and seconded by Cllr B Wilson

Decision

(a) That the Empty Homes Strategy be adopted.

(b) That the recommendation from People and Health Overview Committee of 15 September 2025, be noted and considered as part of the Council's planned work to prepare the budget for the coming financial year and ongoing capital programme.

Reason for the decision

To enable officers to work towards implementing the content of the Empty Homes Strategy, bringing long term empty homes back into beneficial use to meet the corporate aims of the Council and the aims of its Housing Strategy January 2024 to January 2029 - Dorset Council.

61. **Dorset Domestic Abuse Strategy 2025-2028**

The Cabinet Member for Health and Housing presented the revised Dorset Domestic Abuse Strategy 2025-2028 prepared in accordance with statutory duties under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The strategy outlined the Council's continued commitment to supporting victims and their families in safe accommodation, informed by updated needs assessments and a whole systems approach.

The People and Health Overview Committee at its meeting on 15 September, recommended the Domestic Abuse Strategy for approval.

It was proposed by Cllr G Taylor seconded by Cllr S Robinson

Decision

That the Domestic Abuse Strategy 2025-28 be approved.

Reason for the decision

To ensure the Council met its statutory duty under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 relating to preparing and publishing a domestic abuse strategy.

62. **Age Friendly Communities**

The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care set out the progress in developing Age Friendly Communities under the "Communities for All" priority of the Council Plan 2024-29. With 30% of residents aged 65 and over, Dorset faced significant demographic and financial pressures, particularly in adult social care. In presenting the report, the Cabinet Member shared a short information video.

Members were advised that the Council had registered its intent to become an Age Friendly County with the Centre for Aging Better, aligning with the World Health Organisation's eight domain framework.

In response to questions, the Cabinet Member confirmed that the work and paper was enabling, and the approach was evidence-led, community-driven, and designed to deliver long-term sustainability, inclusion, and cost avoidance across health and care systems.

Cabinet welcomed the report and the Age Friendly Communities programme.

It was proposed by Cllr S Robinson and seconded by Cllr C Sutton

Decision

(a) That Dorset's application for Age Friendly accreditation by the World Health Organisation (WHO), be endorsed.

(b) That the integration of Age-Friendly principles into whole council strategy and planning considerations including Adult Social Care locality practice, commissioning and strategic planning, be endorsed.

(c) That, through the Council's OFC programme (Commissioning & Procurement & Community Partnerships Programmes), age friendly principles, be integrated into design of infrastructure, transport, housing, and public spaces.

(d) That Dorset promotes Age Friendly Communities through local charities, businesses, faith groups, and local councils.

Reason for the decision

According to recent research, nearly one-third of Dorset's population is aged 65 or over, significantly higher than the national average of 19%, with a median age of 52 compared to 40.5 nationally. Dorset also had the highest proportion of residents aged 85+ in the UK, and an old age dependency ratio of 537 (vs. 297 nationally), meaning there were 537 people aged 65+ for every 1,000 working-age adults.

As a result, Dorset Council faced growing financial pressures, with adult social care accounting for £159.6 million, over 38% of the 2025/26 net budget. Rising demand, particularly for complex care, combined with limited national funding, highlights the urgent need for preventative approaches. Delivering community programmes, such as Age Friendly Communities offered a strategic solution to reduce future demand, delay formal care, and improve outcomes, whilst delivering long-term sustainability and value.

63. **Urgent items**

There were no urgent items considered at the meeting.

64. **Exempt Business**

It was proposed by Cllr S Bartlett and seconded by Cllr C Sutton

Decision

That the press and the public be excluded for the following item in view of the likely disclosure of exempt information within the meaning of paragraph 3 of schedule 12 A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

Reason for taking the item in private

Paragraph 3 - Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

The live streaming was concluded at this juncture.

65. **Modification of Public Health Contracts over £500k: 0-19 Public Health Nursing and Sexual Health Services**

The Cabinet Member for Health and Housing presented the exempt report and proposed the recommendation. This was seconded by Cllr S Clifford.

Decision

That the recommendations set out in the exempt report be approved.

Reason for the decision

To allow a more managed approach to the phasing of capacity and necessary procurement activity.

Appendix - Public Q&A's and Statements

Duration of meeting: 6.30 - 8.43 pm

Chair

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Cabinet – 9 October 2025

Questions from the Public

1. Question from Mr Geoff Chopping

I am Geoffrey Chopping and although I am a Holt Parish Councillor, I am not asking this question on behalf of Holt Parish Council.

Following a Community Governance Review, all of the Furzehill Settlement and its surrounding area is now part of Holt Parish and therefore the Furzehill Settlement, with its defined settlement boundaries within the Green Belt, can neither be legally described as being part of the Wimborne Minster and Colehill Settlement, nor part of Wimborne Minster or Colehill Parishes.

In the current Dorset Council Local Plan Consultation, some settlements are listed for Tiers 1 and Tiers 2 within the text, whilst Tier 3 Settlements are listed in Figure 3.2. Furzehill is not included among those settlements.

Paragraph 3.2.8 states: *All other areas are either rural in character or comprise small villages/hamlets that do not have a sufficient services or facilities for everyday needs to be met locally. These areas are unlikely to be suitable for growth in line with National Policy.*

This is consistent with National Policy, as although Furzehill has a village store it is generally remote from existing infrastructure and facilities in Wimborne.

However, 4 sites (totalling over 500 homes) that appear in the subordinate Appendix A, touch or are very close to the Furzehill Settlement boundaries. The Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment confirm the unsuitability of these 4 sites because of the remoteness and accessibility issues. All four also happen to be within the Green Belt, although that was only mentioned for one of the four.

CONCLUSION: The exclusion of the legally recognised separate Furzehill Settlement from Tiers 1, 2 and 3 as listed within the Dorset Council Local Plan Consultation 2025, automatically excludes the Furzehill Settlement from significant development other than that proposed in the 2014 Core Strategy document.

QUESTION: Will Dorset Council please confirm the above Conclusion or supply its legal reasoning for rejecting it?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Planning and Emergency Planning

Thank you for your question.

To date we have received over 5,000 submissions in response to the consultation and Cllr Chopping's concerns will be considered as part of the development of the local plan along with all the others and not singled out for response outside the formal consultation.

2. Question from Karen Tippins

It is now clear from this report that the Shaftesbury Town Council proposal has changed materially since the original approved in Oct 2024. The project costs has risen from £876k to approx. £1.44 million, an increase, as I stated back in July, of £500,000 and several key conditions set by Cabinet in Oct 2024 have only partially been met. The report in agenda 12 states now that the STC proposal is only 78% funded; this proves that the decision made in Oct 2024 by cabinet was based on a flawed s106 submission - that claimed 100% funding. The proposal now includes, as I stated in July, a requirement to resubmit a new planning application to Dorset Planning which complies with Building and H&S regulation and revised parking (due to residents complaints).

Importantly on 11th March 2025, Full Council, STC passed a resolution formally requesting that Dorset Council reconsider the basis of the STC proposal, and instead switch to the STC award to the tried and tested Stourpaine Hall tried and tested proposal lead by Barry Coupe. This concept has a 700 signed petition with parking arrangement already endorsed by local residents. This alternative scheme was fully costed and deliverable, no shortfall of funding and would fulfil the s106 purpose of providing a community facility located in the East of Shaftesbury.

To date there has been no evidence that Cabinet were consulted the 11th March 2025 STC resolution states…,'submit a request to Dorset Council to advise how they would consider adopting the Barry Coupe design for Mampitts Hall', as it was known and published by STC that the STC proposal was not Building Control and/or Health and Saftey compliant from the tender responses plus all tenders stated the s106 estimates submitted by STC were flawed and shortfalls of £500,000 quoted.

The Cabinet paper also introduces using the halls first floor for employment purposes; stating DC are to use this hall and s106 contributions for a Dorset Council Family Hub. No resident has asked for this and to be used for employment by DC is inconsistent with the developer contribution contractual terms.

In addition, the cabinet paper proposes early draw down of 10% of s106 funds before conditions of the award have been satisfied. This weaken the financial safeguards and exposes the Council to avoidable risks, particularly when the proposal already faces a funding deficient and untested delivery model. The cafe element also mirrors Newton Abbot Community Hub cafe which closed after only five years, demonstrating how fragile such operating assumptions can be.

My question is therefore as follows:-

Given that the STC proposal is now significantly over budget, under funded, and dependent on revised planning consent, including Dorset Council Family Hub tenancy inconsistent with community use requirements and ignores STC own resolution FC134 to ask Dorset Council to adopt the architect Barry Coupe design - modelled on the Stourpaine Community Hall - why is DC Cabinet not acting on the Shaftesbury Town Council resolution and formally re-evaluating the allocation rather than extending milestones and approving early drawdown for a project whose costs, scope and purpose have materially changed?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Planning and Emergency Planning

Thank you for your question.

Section 106 funding for the delivery of community facilities at Mampitts Green was conditionally awarded to Shaftesbury Town Council in October 2024. Agenda item 12 provides an update in respect of all funding conditions and is based on information provided by Shaftesbury Town Council. Section 4 of the report sub titled 'Alternative options considered' addresses the option of withdrawing the funding offer. The report states that [withdrawal] *would reset the process for applying for s106 causing significant delay to the delivery of development. Given the already prolonged history to this project, further substantial delay would have knock-on implications for build cost and other associated cost increases, adding further risks associated with delivery.*

The report demonstrates that progress made in lots of different areas, but several key conditions including those associated with budget and project delivery remain partially completed, therefore failing to meet in full the milestones that were set. The milestone extensions proposed in the report recommendation serve to provide further time to enable key stages in the project to be addressed, improving the likelihood of delivery.

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Statement from George Dunn, Tenant farmers Association

Please find below some thoughts that we believe the Cabinet should consider as it debates the new management strategy for the county farms estate.

Background

The agricultural units now owned and managed by Dorset County Council (referred to as County Council Smallholdings) have their origins in UK Government policy of the early 20th Century when there was a major concern about the decline in agricultural employment. This led onto a wish to provide farming opportunities for returning ex-servicemen from the two world wars.

The 1970 Agriculture Act embodied the further evolution of the holdings as units to provide a much wider franchise of individuals with opportunities to farm in their own right. In 1984, the House of Lords, in debating what would become the 1984 Agricultural Holdings Act, emphasised the role of these holdings acting as "starter units" which would encourage tenants to move onto larger holdings elsewhere in due course. As a consequence of this, the concept of succession was excluded for these types of holdings.

The question now is what role these farms play in the early part of the 21st Century. Today's challenges are very different to those of a century ago. Local authorities have many more competing demands on their scarce resources and society's link with farming and agriculture has become significantly weaker as we have developed into an ever more urban-centric country. However, food production is still important as is the management of our countryside and there are still many looking to get into farming but who lack the capital to purchase land or to take on larger tenancies offered in the private sector to make their first step.

The Challenge

The TFA is concerned that in recent times there has been an unhealthy focus, in some local authorities, on the capital value of their farm estates which leads to calls for them to be sold to find resources for other challenges being faced in local communities. The TFA believes that with a more strategic approach to their farm estates, local authorities could benefit significantly in financial terms, continue to provide opportunities for those who want to farm in their own right and be a major driver for rural and wider economic development in their localities.

Meeting the Statutory Objective

The rules for administration of statutory smallholdings are set out within Part III of the UK Agriculture Act 1970. Councils in their role as statutory smallholding authorities have a duty under legislation to make it their general aim to provide farms to those who wish to be farmers in their own right. This stems from Section 39 of the 1970 Act which reads:

"Having regard to the general interests of agriculture and of good estate management, [smallholding authorities] shall make it their general aim to provide opportunities for persons to be farmers on their own account by letting holdings to them".

1. In order to meet that objective, the TFA believes that Dorset and other local authorities with a smallholdings estate have both to offer opportunities to new entrants and to work to sustain existing tenants in their farming career into the long term be that on

the local authority estate or in the private sector. Research has shown that county farms are the principal route into farming for new entrants. However, it is not sufficient to merely oversee a conveyor belt approach where new entrants come on at one end and fall off at the other if they cannot make the transition to the private sector. Either smallholdings authorities need to put resources into ensuring that their tenants can make the transition to the private sector or, if this is not possible, to look at extending existing tenancies and providing longer term tenancies for the security of and investment of those granted initial opportunities. In this respect, the TFA is concerned that there is too much of a focus on new entrants and not enough on progression within the draft management strategy. The vision should be to create a stable, long-term framework for the profitable management of County Council farms to ensure that County Council farms provide their principle function of providing opportunities for individuals to be farmers in their own account.

To assist with progression, the TFA believes that there would be merit in investigating the potential for greater networking and collaboration in the management of County Council Smallholding Estates in other parts of England and Wales.

Development Opportunities

The TFA recognises that the council can realise significant sums through the sale of individual farms or pieces of land with development potential. The TFA does not oppose such sales as it recognises the benefit of the capital receipts to the County Council whilst maintaining (and possibly enhancing) the bulk of the agricultural estate.

However, once farms are sold, they are gone forever. It would be inappropriate to treat capital as revenue to fund frontline services on an ongoing basis. Value from the local authority estate needs to be harvested rather than mined in accordance with a strategic plan. The TFA would advocate that Dorset looks to take a longer term, strategic and patient approach to disposals which will enable maximum benefit with minimum disruption. Importantly, at least some of the receipts from such disposal should be earmarked for investing in new or existing smallholdings within the local authority. This is something which the TFA believes should be coordinated and encouraged at an all-Wales level by reference to a previously agreed good practice guide endorsed by farming and professional bodies which can be accessed by clicking here[1].

Wider Benefits

Ownership of County farms also assists the council directly in meeting wider objectives in relation to countryside and environmental issues, access to the countryside, learning outside the classroom, planning policies, greenbelt management and assisting in the management of flood risk. Without the retention of the land bank, these benefits will be lost.

Management

It is essential to have consistent, enthusiastic proactive staff who are able to engage both with the tenants on the estate and with potential new entrants. The estate management team should also be proactive in reaching out to private estates as possible routes to progression for tenants on the council estate. The estate management team must not be passive or just reactive, they very much need to set the agenda.

Rental income

The TFA notes that the council has benchmarked its rental income per acre with other local authorities. We do not consider that this is a valid comparison given the extent to which rent varies for many reasons including the level of fixed equipment, repairing obligations, quality of the land, enterprise choice and many others. Rental incomes must be set on a case-by-case basis taking into consideration all relevant factors on the subject holding.

Code of Good Practice and Commissioner of the Tenant Farming Sector

The county council will be aware of the recently agreed code of Good Practice for Agricultural Landlords and Tenants and the appointment of the Commissioner for the Tenant Farming Sector. The TFA will encourage the county council to include the code of practice within its tenancy agreements (existing tenancy agreements can incorporate code of practice by memorandum) and to include provisions which allow alleged breaches of the code of practice to be put to the Commissioner.

Principal Conclusions

1. Dorset should review its County Council smallholding estate as an important, strategic, asset that should be retained.

2. More effort should be made to support existing and future tenants to sustain their businesses either within the council or, in the future, in the private sector.

3. There should be greater collaboration with other County farm estates.

4. The council should seek to manage disposals of land from its smallholding estate within the context of a properly thought through asset management plan in order to maximise revenue from development sales whilst not undermining the principal objectives of the estate. Some of this development profit should be used to re-invest in the smallholdings estate.

5. The council should pay greater attention to the wider benefits derived from owning and managing its smallholdings estate.

6. The county farms estate needs a vibrant management team.

7. The agricultural landlord and tenant code of practice should be incorporated into all the council's farm tenancy agreements either when newly let all by memorandum allow all alleged breaches of the code to be referred to the Commissioner.

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Statement from Greg Williams, deputy Mayor and Chair of the Mampitts Advisory Committee on behalf of Shaftesbury Town Council.

Thank you for taking the time at cabinet to consider the next stage of the Mampitts project. The residents in the east of Shaftesbury have been promised this community hub for nearly a decade, and we are now at a point where it is closer to reality than ever before. It might not initially seem like that given the change to the condition timelines being recommended by officers, but this new timeline has had the benefit of professional project manager and architectural input in a way the initial application lacked.
To mature the project and develop this more pragmatic plan, Shaftesbury Town Council (STC) has invested nearly £30,000 in this project to date, at risk. This sum excludes the costs of STC personnel time. We have reached the budgetary position where we need early draw down of S106 funds to progress further.

The draw down will enable us to reach RIBA Stage 4 and launch the construction invitation to tender. On receipt of these tenders, we will have much greater certainty of the outturn costs - something I know we are all keen to ascertain considering the increases in the project to date, which we acknowledge.

We make no apology for our ambition for the project to include a first floor, which has driven the cost increase, and from which we can provide space for sorely needed family hub and healthcare services. The eastern ward of Shaftesbury, which I represent along with three other councillors who lead on this project, has its social challenges. These challenges are only going to be compounded by the implementation of the bus gate, further isolating the development from the rest of town.

We must show that STC and DC, working together, can deliver for the whole of Shaftesbury. This project does that. I am also particularly enthused by how we have now forged a closer partnership with DC officers in order to improve delivery certainty.

We recognise the need for stakeholder contributions and grants to close the £0.5m gap between the S106 allocation and the projected outturn. In addition to potential contributions from DC's family hub programme, we have appointed a grants specialist who has experience of the National Lottery Communities Fund in particular. It is in reflecting on their advice that we have not rushed into making the grant application before having evidence of DC's commitment to the project, via this early draw down request in front of you today. Alternative funding sources are also available, as discussed with
officers, but in line with the original condition of the S106 award to pursue grant funding, this is what we are prioritising.

Community engagement with the project remains high, and impatient. We have expanded our Mampitts Advisory Committee to members of the public, and together we are looking to move the car park to a safer location behind the hall that also preserves more of the village green space. I could summarise the wider community sentiment in five words – 'just get on with it.' Shaftesbury Town Council asks for the cabinet's consent to do just that.

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