

Cabinet 19 May 2026

Public Questions

Question from Megan Sutton

As a local resident, parent, and registered NHS and Primary Care Practitioner, I am writing to raise urgent concerns ahead of the upcoming management transition.

From my personal and individual professional perspective in preventative healthcare, a permanent ending of curriculum swimming at The Purbeck School would fail the council's public health goals to reduce health inequalities in coastal areas. In a coastal community like Purbeck, school swimming lessons are not a luxury; they are a vital vehicle for **essential water safety and drowning prevention training**.

Furthermore, I am deeply concerned by recent cost-cutting measures at the Purbeck Sports Centre. Young, under 16-year-old 'Swim Helpers' have had their hours reduced while their supervision responsibilities have increased. Reducing safety ratios while maintaining class sizes places an unacceptable burden on staff who are minors. This directly risks non-compliance with **HSE Guidelines (HSG179)** for safe pool supervision of children working toward their **STA Awards**. Additionally, these regular young staff are being repeatedly asked to consider moving from casual to Zero-Hours contracts.

1. **Safety:** Can the Council provide the revised risk assessment justifying the reduction of helper hours for children's lessons under **HSG179** standards?
2. **Employment:** Given the **Employment Rights Act 2025**, why is the Council suggesting regular youth staff to move to insecure zero-hours contracts ahead of the April 2026 management transition?
3. **Contract:** Will the new private management contract include legally binding 'Social Value' clauses to protect the long-standing school swimming programme, protect long-term club training slots, and **guarantee a price freeze on lane hire fees** so the Wareham and District Swimming Club is not priced out by a commercial operator?

Response from Public Health, Prevention & Communities

Thank you for your question.

It was unfortunate that last year the Department of Education withdrew its exceptional factor funding for swimming pools on senior school sites due to swimming not being on the secondary curriculum. Dorset Council previously received £330,000 from DofE which allowed Purbeck School free daytime access to most of the leisure facilities, including the swimming pool. Now that this funding has ceased, the Council has taken the opportunity to open up the swimming pool for more community sessions, although the school have still been given some slots free

of charge. This will enable the Council to generate some additional income and reduce the impact of the funding loss. This was agreed with Purbeck School, and we now have a new dual use agreement in place.

We have however continued to honour the bookings from feeder schools and they are continuing to have the same access as before. Learning to swim is unquestionably a vital life skill, especially in a coastal location, so I'm pleased to say that we currently have 4 local primary schools using the pool with a further two schools commencing after half term.

With regards to the swimming lessons, the centre has recently made changes to the programme due to increasing waiting lists. These changes will enable existing swimmers to make better progress through the stages and create more availability for those on the waiting lists to begin their swimming journey. Whilst there has been a change to the number of lessons available at each stage, the individual class structures have remained the same and there has been no reduction in the supervision level or in the ratio of teachers and swim helpers. For example, Stage 1 still has one teacher and two swim helpers, and Stage 2 still has one teacher and one swim helper. These policies have been in place for over 15 years and meet all the necessary safety standards.

Due to the variable nature of the swimming lesson programme, swim helpers are initially engaged on a casual basis. When class levels change, this will impact how many swim helpers are required. Where casual employees develop a regular working pattern, they are contacted on a 13 weekly basis and offered the opportunity to move onto a zero-hours contract.

Transitioning to a zero-hours contract provides individuals with the same contractual rights as other employees, while retaining flexibility in their working hours to reflect service demand. These contracts are used regularly throughout the Council and fully comply with all employment legislation.

There has been no management transition in 2026, and no changes will come into effect prior to procuring a single external leisure operator in 2028.

Dorset Council recognises the importance of social value and incorporates this as a core part of its Commercial Strategy and procurement approach. This means we are able to consider wider community benefits alongside cost when commissioning services. We are beginning to develop a strategy for procuring a single external leisure operator in 2028, and community club usage will be something that this Council will want to maintain. Likewise, ensuring that that club hire prices are protected from unreasonable increases will also be important for us when developing the contract specification.