

Public Questions for Cabinet 23 June 2026

1. Question from Karen Tippens

I fully recognise Dorset Council's statutory duties to children with SEND and their families and support the objective of improving local provision and outcomes for children.

Over recent months I have submitted a number of Freedom of Information requests to Dorset Council regarding SEND Home to School Transport costs and the financial pressures associated with SEND provision.

The information disclosed shows that SEND transport expenditure has increased from approximately £10.5 million in 2022 to approximately £18.55 million in 2026, an increase of around 77% in four years.

The Council has confirmed that:

- approximately 95% of this expenditure relates to taxis and minibuses;
- Dorset currently operates 1,032 SEND transport routes;
- 362 of those routes are single-occupancy routes;
- the average annual route cost is approximately £16,373;
- the most expensive route costs £75,710 per year;
- one transport provider received over £1.7 million in a single year; and
- Personal Travel Budgets have averaged around £5,273 per pupil compared with approximately £16,000 for conventional transport arrangements.

The Cabinet report before members today states that Inclusion Hub places cost approximately £19,500 per annum compared with independent placements costing around £64,000 per annum and that the programme will generate savings by supporting more children closer to home.

However, the public report contains no explanation as to whether SEND transport costs have been included in the financial modelling, business case or cost-benefit analysis supporting these proposals, despite transport expenditure now approaching £18.5 million per year. It is therefore unclear from the published report whether the stated financial benefits fully reflect the wider costs of transporting pupils to and from SEND provision.

My question is therefore:

Can the Cabinet Member confirm whether SEND transport costs, taxi and minibus expenditure, and any anticipated transport savings have been included within the financial modelling and business case for the Inclusion Hub programme and, if so,

what level of transport savings are expected to arise from educating more children locally rather than transporting them to specialist placements further away?

Response of the Cabinet Member for Regeneration Economic Growth & Strategic Assets

The financial case for the Inclusion bases has been developed with consideration of the wider SEND system, including the significant pressures associated with home to school transport. While the published report focuses on direct education placement costs and savings, we expect that Inclusion bases will deliver wider benefits and cost avoidance, including a reduction in transport expenditure.

A key aim of the Inclusion base programme is to increase specialist provision within local communities so that more children and young people can access the support they need closer to home. This aligns with both Dorset Council's Belonging Strategy and the national SEND reform, which seeks to provide support locally and reduce the need for children to travel significant distances to access suitable provision.

Although it is not possible to quantify the level of transport savings that will be achieved at this stage, we expect that increasing local provision will reduce travel distances for many children and young people and, over time, reduce reliance on higher-cost transport arrangements. These benefits will emerge progressively as placements in the new bases are made.

2. Question from Chris Pike

On 2 June 2026, the Coastal Learning Partnership opened a public consultation proposing the closure of St George's CE Primary School in Langton Matravers, with pupils to be merged with St Mark's CE Primary School in Swanage. This proposal is presented as a response to falling pupil numbers across Purbeck.

However, despite repeated assurances from CLP that the consultation is open and undecided, the overwhelming view of parents, carers, and the wider Langton community is that the process is biased and predetermined. The consultation materials consistently assume that closure is the only viable solution, frame alternatives as unsustainable, use persuasive rather than neutral language, and position CLP's preferred outcome as both logical and inevitable. This is not the standard of impartiality expected in a statutory consultation affecting children, families, and the school that we consider at the heart of the village.

I would strongly encourage Dorset Council to read Langton Parish Council's consultation reply, which clearly sets out why the consultation appears predetermined and procedurally flawed.

On 7 June 2026, a formal letter was sent to CLP raising serious concerns about the

immediate and damaging consequences of the consultation. Parents highlighted that many families now believe the closure of St George's is already decided. As a result, a significant number are actively seeking places at Corfe Castle, St Marys, and Swanage Primary. Pre-school numbers for 2026/27 are also being affected. This is accelerating the very decline in pupil numbers that CLP claims the consultation is intended to address, and it places the schools stability, and children's wellbeing at risk.

The consultation documents repeatedly state that the purpose of the proposal is to secure a sustainable, high-quality educational future. Yet CLP has not assessed the likely parental response to closure, nor the impact on capacity in neighbouring schools. This omission is inexplicable and undermines the credibility of the process.

Ww as parents are deeply concerned about the emotional impact on our children, many of whom are now anxious and unsettled. These harms could have been mitigated had the consultation followed the Gunning Principles: that consultation must occur at a formative stage, provide sufficient information for meaningful response, allow adequate time, and ensure that responses are considered.

Given these issues, I am here this evening to express serious concern about the level of scrutiny and oversight currently applied to CLP.

Question

My question is this: Will Dorset Council commit to full and independent scrutiny of the CLP consultation process—given the serious concerns raised about bias, predetermined outcomes, and failure to meet the Gunning Principles—and will the Council commit to leading a genuinely collaborative, Purbeck-wide approach to falling pupil numbers?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education

The consultation regarding the proposed merger of St George's and St Mark's CE Primary Schools is led by the Coastal Learning Partnership, the multi-academy trust responsible for both schools.

The Trust has provided assurance within its published FAQs that this is a genuine and open consultation process. While the consultation document outlines the option that the Trust believes may best secure high-quality education for the future, no decision has been made. The Trust Board has committed to carefully consider all feedback received before determining whether to proceed with, amend, or halt the proposal.

Additional oversight is provided by the Department for Education (DfE) as any proposal of this nature constitutes a significant change and therefore requires their

formal approval. Any application can only be submitted once the consultation has concluded and must include a full account of the consultation outcomes. The Local Authority does not have the remit to carry out a full and independent scrutiny of the process. Therefore, concerns regarding the consultation process need to be raised with the Coastal Learning Partnership or escalated direct to the DfE.

Local Authorities have a statutory responsibility to ensure sufficient school places for every child of compulsory school age and work collaboratively with school leaders to balance supply and demand in line with changing demographics locally.

There are other areas of Dorset as well as Purbeck where falling pupil numbers is proving challenging for local schools. Dorset Council works with schools to support them to remain viable in ways such as reducing Published Admission Numbers (PAN) and restructuring staff teams to align with reduced numbers. Both schools have already taken actions to manage the impact of falling numbers, including reducing the number of classes and introducing more mixed age teaching.

However, the Coastal Learning Partnership has concluded that these actions have not sufficiently addressed the financial and organisational pressures facing the schools. As a result, they are now exploring further options, as set out in the consultation document.

As outlined in Dorset Council's statement within the consultation, we support the need for this process. We encourage all members of the community to engage fully so that final decisions are informed by a broad and representative range of views. We continue to work closely with the Coastal Learning Partnership and the Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education throughout this process.