

**Cabinet – 10 September 2020**

**Written question from Michael Douse to the Leader, Isle of Wight Council**

“Now that the Leader of the Isle of Wight Council Cllr Stewart has publicly admitted on IW Radio that Cowes Floating Bridge Number 6 is in effect a total failure, when will the IW Council place an order for a new Cowes Floating Bridge to replace it?”

**Response**

Thank you for your question Mr Douse. As you know, the issues and challenges with floating bridge 6 emanate back to its purchase and contract which were overseen by the previous Independent Administration. You will also recall the floating bridge was funded with a grant from the Solent Local Enterprise of some £3.5 million pounds. Since that time, the current conservative administration has inherited responsibility for management of the new bridge and all its issues and challenges arising since May 2017.

Our primary focus has been to maintain the essential service and vital link this vessel provides between East and West Cowes - enabling children to get to school, workers to get to work and visitors to travel to Cowes. We recognise the design and construction of a chain link ferry is unique and not something you can just get off the shelf.

When it arrived on the Island in May 2017 everyone expected it to work correctly and provide a good service for the community for years to come. What we did not expect was the catalogue of problems we have since experienced over the subsequent years, which include key issues around chain depth, noise, broken prow arms, electrical issues and most recently with the overall hydraulics system. Added challenges recently being the need to remove it from service during the main parts of the ST Marys Roundabout roadworks during August and September creating a perfect storm of disruption when we least needed it.

You are right insofar as I have been drawn to question whether this vessel was fit for purpose when it was designed and constructed as agreed in the contract and this needs to be resolved.

Having taken legal advice the council is following the steps agreed in the contracts to secure appropriate remedy for the damages that it and, by inference, the local community, has suffered. The council must now follow the prescribed pre action procedures set out in the contract and by the courts in order to seek to appropriate redress.

Discussions are ongoing between the Council and the two companies contracted to design and build the floating bridge and these discussions will be completed in the normal process. If the required pre action discussions do not conclude with a satisfactory remedy, then it will be open to the council to issue court proceedings to seek remedy including financial loss. I think it would be inappropriate for me to comment further on this aspect at this stage whilst we seek to find a legal resolution.

A full report on this position was presented to scrutiny on Tuesday and as agreed with scrutiny I will also be meeting the local ward councillors and a small group of 'experts' to hear their thoughts and ideas on the future. In the meanwhile, our plan is to fix the current problem with the hydraulics and ensure the vessel is back in the water as soon as possible. We have no plans at this time to order a new Floating Bridge.

In terms of cost can I point out that we have effectively paid a £1 subsidy for every person who has travelled on the vessel since 2017 – but we know this is not sustainable in the current financial climate - so I believe we need to fix it and recover our losses on behalf of the community.

Thank you for your question.