

11 DECEMBER 2023

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the New Forest District Council held on Monday, 11 December 2023.

- * Cllr Neville Penman (Chairman)
- * Cllr David Hawkins (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

- * Alan Alvey
- * Peter Armstrong
Geoffrey Blunden
- * Hilary Brand
Mark Clark
- * Steve Clarke
- * Jill Cleary
- * Keith Craze
- * Kate Crisell
- * Sean Cullen
- * Jack Davies
Steve Davies
- * Philip Dowd
- * Barry Dunning
Jacqui England
- * Allan Glass
- * David Harrison
- * Matthew Hartmann
- * John Haywood
- * Jeremy Heron
- * Nigel Linford
- * Patrick Mballa
- * Colm McCarthy

Councillors:

- * David Millar
- * Neil Millington
- * Ian Murray
- * Alan O'Sullivan
- * Stephanie Osborne
- * Adam Parker
- * Dave Penny
- * Dan Poole
- * Caroline Rackham
- * Alvin Reid
- * Joe Reilly
- * Janet Richards
- * Barry Rickman
- * Steve Rippon-Swaine
- * John Sleep
- * Michael Thierry
- * Derek Tipp
- * Neil Tungate
Alex Wade
- * Malcolm Wade
- * Christine Ward
- * Phil Woods
- * Richard Young

*Present

Officers Attending:

Kate Ryan, Grainne O'Rourke, Alan Bethune, James Carpenter, Tanya Coulter, Daniel Reynafarje and Matt Wisdom.

Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Blunden, Clark, S Davies, England and A Wade.

45 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Special and Ordinary Council meetings held on 9 October 2023, be confirmed.

46 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of any disclosable pecuniary interests by Members.

47 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**Grainne O'Rourke**

The Chairman reported that it was the final full Council meeting for the Strategic Director for Housing, Communities and Governance, and the Council's Monitoring Officer, Grainne O'Rourke.

Grainne joined NFDC from a local government background in June 1997, as Principal Solicitor - Planning. Members with long service recalled her excellent work supporting the Planning Committee.

Grainne had a succession of promotions, including to Head of Legal & Democratic Services in February 2000, with the addition of Monitoring Officer responsibilities reflected in 2001. Grainne was recognised as a brilliant advisor to the Council and its Members.

Grainne's work in the Monitoring Officer role also included the significant progress from 2011 to move the Council forward from the old Standards regime and help shape its Code of Conduct, and more recently overseeing the preparations for the new Council in 2023, a refreshed Constitution and a comprehensive new Member Induction Programme.

In 2015, Grainne became the Executive Head of Governance and Regulation, broadening her responsibilities across a range of regulatory services.

Grainne began the transformation of the Council's full range of Housing Services from 2018. And as preparations continued to meet the requirements of the new Social Housing Regulator, it was recognised that the Council could not be better placed to rise to future challenges in housing, having had Grainne's driving force to modernise and ensure that services meet the housing needs of local residents.

In recent years, Grainne was also instrumental in helping to deliver the Public Space Protection Orders for the New Forest, working with partners to secure powers to help protect the natural environment. Members recognised that her leadership of this project was much appreciated by local partners including the National Park, the Forestry Commission and the Verderers.

Most recently, in November 2022, Grainne became the Strategic Director for Housing, Communities and Governance and would leave the Council with the legacy of high quality services, her professional approach and an incredible contribution to the Council over 26 years with NFDC. The Chairman extended, on behalf of the Council, his personal thanks to Grainne, for all her work.

Group Leaders also paid tribute to Grainne on behalf of their groups, recognising her contribution to initiatives such as St George's Hall, Calshot, the transformation of Housing Services and the significant contribution to the Council in the Monitoring Officer role.

Grainne thanked Members for their kind words, and wished the Council every success for the future.

Engagements

The Chairman reported on the following engagements undertaken since the last Council meeting:-

17 October

Attended the Youth Options Annual Review and Celebration at Hanger Farm Arts Centre in Totton, hosted by HM Lord Lieutenant of Hampshire. This shared the success stories of some of the children and young people together with the work that Youth Options provide.

26 October

HM Lord Lieutenant of Hampshire hosted the Hampshire Awards Ceremony as President, held at St Swithuns School in Winchester.

2 November

Attended the Solent Mind Celebration and AGM, which reflected on the past year, looking ahead to the future and continuing to strengthen partnerships, and looking at the challenges of mental health.

6 November

Attended the Annual Awards Ceremony of Minstead Trust, hosted by Daniel, someone supported by the Trust. The Wellbeing Instructor Andy spoke about the internal magazine that is produced and there was also a demonstration and a performance by the Portsmouth supported choir.

13 November

Attended, as President, the AGM of New Forest Mencap in New Milton. The agenda consisted of funding and grants during the financial year and an annual report.

17 November

Attended the Royal Hampshire Regiment Reception in Winchester.

24 November

Attended the presentation of a new defibrillator positioned at the New Inn Pub in Hounslow, Totton. This was due to the fundraising efforts over the last 18 months to raise money for this to be provided and installed. Wessex Heartbeat presented the community with it on the day.

Represented the District Council at the Beaulieu Annual Estate Dinner, hosted by Lord Montagu. The guest speaker, Hallam Mills, spoke about his work at Bisterne Farms and the Environmental Farmers Group.

30 November

Attended the Brilliance in Business Awards for the New Forest Business Partnership. The awards ceremony, representing the 9000 businesses in the New Forest, celebrated the success and achievements of local businesses, and the presentation of awards were made in the 18 categories.

2 December

Attended the Carol Service for the New Milton Town Mayor, featuring performances by the New Forest Community Choir and the La Nova singers.

6 December

Hosted the Inaugural Long Service Award Annual Reception, celebrating NFDC employees who had reached 20, or 30 years of service to the Council this year.

The Chairman extended his thanks to the Vice-Chairman for attending the Mayor of Test Valley's charity event on 10 November, on his behalf.

48 LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Leader made the following announcements:-

One Year as Leader

The Leader referred to the recent one-year anniversary of being Leader of the Council. She expressed her privilege to have taken on the Leader portfolio, to listen to residents, visit key projects, and work with officers at the council. She placed on record her thanks to the Council's Members for their work over the last year.

Freeport and Partnerships

The Leader continued to represent the Council through developing relationships with partners locally and across the Freeport. Last month she met with the new Principal of Brockenhurst College to discuss how the organisations could work more closely together on the skills agenda, and she also attended the Solent Cluster Conference as key-note speaker. The Leader pledged the Council's full support to The Solent Cluster's work and the transition to Net Zero, due to the positive lasting legacy for the District's residents. This would help the New Forest to keep being a place for opportunity and innovation. The Leader was also honoured to have been invited to join the District Council Network board where she would continue to highlight the great services delivered by districts, local to their communities, and also represent issues of shared concern with Government.

Local Bank Closures

One issue the Leader knew was of a concern to many in the Forest, was the closure of local bank branches, which seemed to be escalating. She had written to the two local MPs on the matter and also asked officers to ensure the Council responded to the current FCA consultation regarding access to cash.

Corporate Plan and Transformation

Members were reminded of the development of the draft Corporate plan which would shape Council services based on the results of the residents' survey, whilst aiming to operate in greener and smarter ways. She was proud to highlight the progress made in shaping Future New Forest – the transformation strategy that would take the Council from good to great. The Council's local leadership role was also highlighted, with the example of making a difference in Calshot by supporting the community through updating facilities, improving wellbeing, and finding solutions for food insecurity.

Council Officers

The Leader reported her reflection that the officers at New Forest District Council were exceptional and she expressed her thanks for all their work. The Leader highlighted her passion to continue to promote the Council as a respected local employer with benefits that support people's home lives as well as thriving in the workplace. In the coming months, she invited Members to engage in the initiatives to ensure the New Forest continued to be a wonderful place to live, work, rest and visit.

49 REPORT OF CABINET - 1 NOVEMBER 2023

PART I – ITEMS RESOLVED BY CABINET

There were no speakers on the items resolved by Cabinet at its meeting on 1 November 2023.

PART II – RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL

Item 2 – Procurement Strategy (2023 Refresh)

Cllr Heron introduced the item and moved the recommendations from the Cabinet meeting. Cllr Cleary seconded the motion.

RESOLVED:

That the Procurement Strategy (2023 Refresh) set out in attachment Appendix 1 of the report, be adopted.

50 REPORT OF CABINET - 6 DECEMBER 2023

PART I – ITEMS RESOLVED BY CABINET

Item 3 – Medium Term Financial Plan 2023 Onwards

One Member highlighted the burden placed on motorists of the New Forest by raising car parking fees and charges. In response, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate highlighted that the Council's decision on this matter had provided for service users of car parks to contribute towards an appropriate level of fees and charges, rather than the wider local population, some of whom may not be able to afford a car.

Item 5 – Supporting the Armed Forces and the Armed Forces Covenant

The Council's Armed Forces Member Champion welcomed the amendment made at the Cabinet meeting, to recognise explicitly in the recommendations all four services and Armed Forces charities. Other Members welcomed the report and the work underway across the Council.

One Member highlighted the work of the Royal British Legion, including recent campaigns for a Veterans Commissioner for England. He encouraged councillors to keep in touch with this work and to support their campaigns where relevant and appropriate in support of the covenant commitments.

PART II – RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL**Item 6 – Transformation Strategy 2024-2028 (Future New Forest – Transforming Tomorrow, Together)**

The Leader introduced the item and moved the recommendations from the Cabinet meeting. Cllr Heron seconded the motion.

Some Members highlighted the importance of maintaining face-to-face customer services for residents, ensuring this worked for all parts of the New Forest. Consultation in respect of any proposed changes was also highlighted as a key aspect of bringing both staff and residents along the Transformation journey.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate highlighted that Transformation was a broader improvement programme wider than customer services alone, which in itself was designed to achieve efficiencies. This would allow the Council to consider options to maintain or enhance capacity for those residents who engaged with the Council in a non-digital way.

In responding to the debate, the Leader committed to maintaining a face-to-face customer offer for those residents who needed it, alongside ensuring that meaningful consultation was undertaken and considered throughout the process.

RESOLVED:

That the Transformation Strategy at Appendix 1 and the Year One Indicative Work Programme at Appendix 2 of the Cabinet report, be approved.

Item 7 – Council Tax 2024/25 – Setting the Tax Base

Cllr Heron introduced the item and moved the recommendations from the Cabinet meeting. Cllr Cleary seconded the motion.

RESOLVED:

That:-

- (a) The calculation of the Council's tax base for the year 2024/25 be approved; and
- (b) Pursuant to the report and in accordance with the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012, the amount

calculated by this Council as its council tax base for the year 2024/25 be as follows and as detailed in Appendix 3 of the Cabinet report:-

PARISH/TOWN	TAX BASE 24/25
Ashurst & Colbury	939.9
Beaulieu	511.9
Boldre	1,067
Bramshaw	337.8
Bransgore	1,846.8
Breamore	185.7
Brockenhurst	1,911.1
Burley	809.2
Copythorne	1,235.7
Damerham	248.3
Denny Lodge	159.2
East Boldre	384.4
Ellingham, Harbridge & Ibsley	632
Exbury & Lepe	116.3
Fawley	4,634.5
Fordingbridge	2,423.8
Godshill	225
Hale	267.7
Hordle	2,434.2
Hyde	519.8
Hythe & Dibden	7,482.5
Lymington & Pennington	7,529.6
Lyndhurst	1,478.5
Marchwood	2,075.2
Martin	200.3
Milford on Sea	2,938.7
Minstead	374.4
Netley Marsh	818
New Milton	10,619.4
Ringwood	5,501.6
Rockbourne	169.9
Sandleheath	299.6
Sopley	392.4
Sway	1,731.8
Totton & Eling	9,511.7
Whitsbury	104.7
Woodgreen	252.9
Whole District	72,371.5

Item 8 – Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2024/25, Housing Benefit Income Disregard and National Non-Domestic Rate Relief Policy Review

Cllr Heron introduced the item and moved the recommendations from the Cabinet meeting. Cllr Cleary seconded the motion.

A Member of the Task and Finish Group expressed his concern about moving forward with changes, given the low levels of consultation response. Some Members asked how this might be addressed moving forwards. A member highlighted the volume of consultations the public were currently being asked to

respond to and this might be presenting in fatigue to the exercise, without assurance that the responses were truly impactful on the final design of proposals.

In response to the debate, the Portfolio Holder shared Members' disappointment with the low number of consultation responses. However, the context for the report was £9.5 million of resident support, which had been received well by partner agencies, many of which were advocates for those hard to reach groups that Members recognised were important to engage.

RESOLVED:

That:-

- (a) An increase the standard earnings disregard and removal of the additional earnings disregard, as detailed in Section 7 of the Cabinet report, from 1 April 2024, be approved;
- (b) That a Task and Finish Group review a Banded scheme during 2024;
- (c) That the full disregard of war pension income in the assessment of Housing Benefit, as detailed in Section 9 of the Cabinet report, be approved; and
- (d) That the updated National Non-Domestic Rate Relief policy as detailed in Section 10 of the Cabinet report, be approved.

Item 9 – Freedom Leisure Contract Variation

Cllr Poole introduced the item and moved the recommendations from the Cabinet meeting. Cllr Cleary seconded the motion.

Cllr Rackham moved the following amendment as an addition to the recommendation:-

“That the support offered to Freedom Leisure is conditional, upon Freedom Leisure guaranteeing that existing services used by established community groups are protected and maintained.”

Cllr M Wade seconded the amendment.

Members speaking for the amendment highlighted the contract variations undertaken to support Freedom Leisure to date, and concerns that this would continue into the future, coupled with uncertainty for community use of the facilities.

Members speaking against the amendment highlighted the improved financial position of the Council having entered into the partnership with Freedom Leisure. It was suggested that in operating the leisure centres, Freedom should be entitled to make operational decisions to the benefit of all customers and users of the facilities. Some Members expressed that the recent swimming club consultation could have been handled better and lessons could be learnt moving forward on any proposed service changes.

In responding to the debate on the amendment, Cllr Rackham highlighted the uncertainty faced by community groups and the need for protection of their use of the facilities they depended upon.

In responding to the debate on the amendment, the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing reiterated that Freedom Leisure needed to make operational decisions on the running of leisure services. He concluded by reminding the Council that had it not entered into the partnership, the full financial burden for the rising cost of utilities would be with the Council.

Put to the vote, the amendment was lost.

The Council continued to debate the substantive motion. One Member highlighted the global energy crisis that could not have been foreseen when the Council entered into the partnership and in doing so, it had allowed the Council to share this burden instead of having to address the full financial impact alone. Some Members expressed their concern that the contract continued to be subject to variations, and this was changing the landscape of the original benefits of the partnership arrangements.

In responding to the debate on the substantive motion, the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing reminded the Council that five leisure centres remained open for business in the New Forest, and without the support of a partner to share the burden of the utility costs, the Council would be looking at how the full financial burden could be addressed. In many other local authority areas, this gap had been addressed by the closure of some facilities.

A request for a recorded vote was supported by the requisite additional 11 Members. Subsequently, the substantive motion of the report of Cabinet was put to a recorded vote, the outcome of which was as follows:-

Voting for:- Cllrs Alvey, Armstrong, Clarke, Cleary, Craze, Crisell, Dunning, Glass, Hartmann, Hawkins, Heron, Linford, Murray, O'Sullivan, Penman, Penny, Poole, Reid, Rickman, Rippon-Swaine, Sleep, Thierry, Tipp, Tungate, Ward and Young.

Voting against:- Cllrs Brand, Cullen, J Davies, Dowd, Harrison, Haywood, Mballa, McCarthy, Millar, Millington, Osborne, Parker, Rackham, Reilly, Richards, M Wade and Woods.

Abstaining:- None.

The motion was carried, 26 in favour, 17 against, 0 abstaining.

RESOLVED:

That the proposals set out in the Cabinet report be approved, to vary the contract with Freedom Leisure to deal with the significant challenges presented by the unforeseen increases in energy costs, achievable via the incorporation of a mechanism for the Council to share the cost of utilities over and above the costs assumed in the bid.

51 QUESTIONS

Questions were put and answered under Standing Order 22, as follows:-

- From Cllr Parker to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Cleary on Southern Water.

- From Cllr Woods to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden on car parking fees and charges.
- From Cllr J Davies to the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing, Cllr Poole on Freedom Leisure.
- From Cllr M Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing on crime reduction.
- From Cllr Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden on the Waste Strategy.
- From Cllr Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden, on car park income.
- From Cllr Brand to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Tipp, on engaging with New Forest businesses.
- From Cllr Millar to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden on the Waste Strategy.
- From Cllr Haywood to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Cleary on the closure of Ringwood Brewery
- From Cllr Rackham to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Cleary, on Southern Water
- From Cllr Haywood to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate on the impact of increased fees and charges.

Note: A copy of the full questions and replies are attached to these minutes.

52 NOTICE OF MOTION

The Chairman confirmed that Cllr Blunden, with the consent of his seconder, had withdrawn the motion as he had unexpectedly been unable to attend the meeting to present it.

This would be brought forward to a future Council meeting.

53 APPOINTMENT OF MONITORING OFFICER

RESOLVED:

1. That Tanya Coulter (currently Service Manager – Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer) be appointed as Monitoring Officer, with effect from the departure date of the current Monitoring Officer, Grainne O'Rourke.
2. That the consequential amendments be made throughout the Council's Constitution.

54 MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PANELS

There were no changes.

CHAIRMAN

FULL COUNCIL – 11 DECEMBER 2023 – QUESTIONS UNDER STANDING ORDER 22

First Questions

Question 1

From Cllr Parker to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Cleary

I have been made aware of yet another sizeable sewage leak at a Southern Water run pumping station in the New Forest - this time at Flexford Lane, Sway.

I was delighted that the Leader shared my concerns about the sewage discharge near Lyndhurst in September and agreed that pollution of our rivers and land is unacceptable. She will recall that she committed in her statement of 11 September 2023 to this Council that “the District Council will do all it can to support [the Environment Agency]” and that the Council would “continue to work hard with our partners to protect and improve [the New Forest environment]”.

The Leader will recall that in 2021 Southern Water was fined £90m for deliberately dumping billions of litres of raw sewage into the Beaulieu River and other sites. Then, just last month, over 18,000 households in our District, including residents in my ward of Brockenhurst and Denny Lodge, had no water supply due to the shutdown of the Testwood Water Supply Works. Most recently I have had videos and photos shared with me of raw sewage running into a stream at Flexford Lane water Works in Sway, with toilet paper clinging to the verges.

The ongoing impact of these failings cannot continue to simply be accepted by this Council. Therefore will the Leader please detail all actions taken by the Council since her statement of the 11 September 2023 to support enforcement efforts and protect the New Forest environment? Will she also lay out her plans for the coming weeks and months to ensure that our residents have both the unique environment in which we all live and their water supply protected?

Answer:

I was extremely concerned to hear of this incident and agree that it is unacceptable. Whilst it is the Environment Agency that has lead responsibility for investigating the pollution incidents you have highlighted and for taking enforcement action to tackle serious pollution of controlled waters, Council officers will continue to work closely with the Environment Agency and Southern Water as we have a shared desire to prevent similar incidents from occurring.

During the past couple of months, officers of the Council have also engaged with Southern Water on strategic planning matters and their draft business plan, which identifies priorities of protecting and improving our environment, healthy rivers and seas and providing a reliable supply of water to their customers. This plan details investment expected in the New Forest to deliver improvements to storm overflows and capacity of their networks and has been submitted to OFWAT for scrutiny prior to determination. We will continue to engage with Southern Water over the next few months as they begin to implement these plans.

As you will be aware, the Council supported our communities in response to the incident in November where over 18,000 properties along the Waterside were without drinking water and are continuing to work with our emergency planning partners to ensure Southern Water learn from this experience and put in place robust plans to improve resilience and reduce the likelihood of future incidents.

Question 2

From Cllr Woods to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden

Fordingbridge Surgery recently contacted me about the increase in the price of the parking clocks. Specifically, they informed me that one member of staff has decided to leave to go to a job where they don't have to pay to park. In light of the failure to consult businesses and services before forcing through this massive increase, would the Portfolio Holder consider introducing a discounted parking clock for local businesses?

Answer:

Our council car parks have a range of users, including visitors and tourists, shoppers, and those who work in nearby businesses. Our car parks are conveniently located and well maintained, and they therefore play a significant role in our local economy.

We also know, through benchmarking, that our parking clocks present outstanding value for money and provide a large saving compared to the equivalent pay and display costs.

As such our parking clocks already provide local businesses with a discounted parking scheme and we are delighted to see this continue.

Note – this question was dealt with in writing in the absence of Cllr Blunden.

Question 3

From Cllr J Davies to the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing, Cllr Poole

Following news of a further planned bailout, this would now be the 2nd bailout by New Forest Taxpayers since Freedom Leisure were handed the leisure centre contract. Does the Portfolio Holder agree that the Council should have done what the Liberal Democrats proposed at the time and waited until we were out of covid to decide what to do with the leisure service?

Answer:

I welcome this question entirely as it gives me another opportunity to comment on how the Council has been financially well supported by Freedom Leisure in the first 2 years of the contract with them.

Yes, we paid a contractual management fee in year 1. This fee was half a million pounds less than the position originally forecast by the Council under the continuation of the in-house model. Do I think it the wrong decision to save the New Forest tax-payer half a million pounds in one year, absolutely not; I stand by it fully.

The matter of the significant and unforeseen utilities increase is very unfortunate, but again, I absolutely welcome the fact that we have a partner taking the significant lions-share of the increased costs, as opposed to those increased costs landing solely with this authority and so to the New Forest tax-payer.

I wonder, had Councillor Davies attended the recent all-member briefing on this subject, I'm not sure he would have asked this question at all.

Note – in response to a supplementary question referring to the closure of leisure centres in other areas operated by Freedom, the Portfolio Holder reiterated that he was happy with the

level of service being provided and that five centres remained open for business in the New Forest.

Question 4

From Cllr M Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing, Cllr Poole

In the year ending July 2022 there were 12,174 incidents of reported crime in the New Forest district a 17.3% rise on the previous year ending in July 2021, what is this authority doing to combat this growth in crime beyond putting in some more CCTV cameras?

Answer:

As my fellow Member will recall, the period July 2020 – July 2021 was a time when England was under much social restrictions. The impact of two full lockdowns, the rule of six, businesses mandated to close, a 10pm curfew for the hospitality sector with social restrictions only ending in July 2021 widespread, also interrupted social behaviours and crime locally and nationally.

I am pleased to advise that as Chair of the Safer New Forest Strategy and Delivery Group, I see first-hand, the commitment and collaboration of representatives from the Safer New Forest partnership. Through the formulation of the annual strategic assessment of crime and disorder partnership plan to address crime and disorder issues, this Council, with the support and shared vision of our partners, is intrinsically involved in addressing crime and disorder in our communities. Let me touch on some specifics:-

- Protecting our most vulnerable children through positive safeguarding actions through the Missing, Exploited and Trafficked group and Local Children's Partnership.*
- NFDC lead the district wide Domestic Abuse Forum, providing training to frontline practitioners, supporting victims of domestic abuse and resourcing local services for New Forest residents experiencing harm.*
- Working alongside our partners in Police, Probation, Adult Services and Health, operating tactically to interrupt offending behaviour and divert offenders through positive opportunities and channels of change.*
- Representing the needs of the New Forest to the Home Office and securing additional financial awards for rural communities. For implementing preventative measures for protecting violence against women & girls.*

It is through a coordinated approach with our partners, that the total New Forest crime is equivalent to 0.3% of England's total crime incidents in the year. The findings from the serious violence assessment confirm the New Forest had lower rates of violence with injury, robbery, and possession of a weapon compared to other Hampshire authorities, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth & Southampton and England averages.

I am pleased to confirm that through this dedicated approach, the New Forest remains a safe place to live, work and visit being the 118th safest non-metropolitan district in England (of 181 total) by order of crime.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on increased crime in the New Forest and measures to make residents feel safer, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the upcoming CCTV project that would deliver effective outcomes in this area.

Question 5

From Cllr Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden

Following the recent announcement that the costs for implementing the Waste Strategy have now changed due to Government intervention. How much can we expect back from the Government on wasted costs, or will all be passed on to our Residents and taxpayers?

Answer:

Members who attended the most recent Place and Sustainability Overview and Scrutiny Panel had the opportunity to receive an update and ask questions on the implications of “Simpler Recycling” as announced by the Prime Minister on 20 September. That update report also went through Cabinet last week. On both occasions it was made clear that the overall financial implications of the proposed changes, what funding is available, and how this Council will need to respond are still being worked through.

There is much in our Waste Strategy, including the rolling out of wheeled bins that will not need to change, and there is a clear alignment with our desire to increase recycling levels across the District.

Much investment already committed was required in any case, to ensure our refuse and recycling services were fit for the future. We expect there to be clarity from DEFRA in the coming weeks over funding for the roll out of elements of Simpler Recycling such as food waste. As stated in the report that went to Cabinet, officers will report back to Cabinet once we are able to fully quantify the financial implications.

Note – this question was dealt with in writing in the absence of Cllr Clark and Cllr Blunden.

Question 6

From Cllr Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden

Parking charges are bringing in £1.2million but costs of car park maintenance are approximately £400,000 annually. Can the portfolio holder please explain what the excess profit is to be spent on?

Answer:

The Council does not make “profit” on its car parks, any surplus revenue generated beyond the costs of maintenance and management funds the provision of other council services that our residents rely on, to support service delivery by the Council and as identified in our Medium Term Financial Plan is a key component of delivering a balanced budget.

Note – this question was dealt with in writing in the absence of Cllr Blunden.

Question 7

From Cllr Brand to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Tipp

One of the key activities of the Business, Tourism and High Street Portfolio is to – identify all businesses in the District and target engagement with them. Could the Portfolio holder explain what this means and what this looks like?

Answer:

The Portfolio in question is now the Planning and Economy Portfolio. Identifying all businesses in the District is a very high thing to achieve, with businesses coming and going all the time.

What we are trying to do is to contact those businesses who wish to engage and want our help. We send out 3,500 electronic newsletters to our businesses, alongside chambers of trade and local partners. We also run business support activities such as the recent and ongoing Rural Fund grants which are still open and businesses can apply for until March 2024.

Cabinet colleagues, officers and I meet regularly with representatives from some of our largest businesses, including the Association of British Ports, Exxon Mobil and those promoting Fawley Waterside.

In the New Year we will be launching the very popular ‘Shop Doctor’ scheme, a mystery shopper initiative. We are also very active with the New Forest Business Partnership.

I hope you will agree that this Council has an impressive record of engagement and it will continue to do so.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on a straw poll conducted by Cllr Brand which raised some areas for consideration on effectively engaging local businesses, the Portfolio Holder welcomed the receipt of this poll so that officers could consider the data.

Question 8

From Cllr Millar to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden

Although many residents support this Council’s move to adopting wheelie bins, many do not. And on both sides there are people who are concerned about the implementation process, and in particular, where such bins will be stored. For example, a sizeable number of properties in Fordingbridge were built with brick bin stores, designed to hold dustbins. They will not be suitable for wheelie bins. Residents have been told that NFDC will be carrying out a survey of properties across the district to identify which properties will need alternatives to wheelie bins.

How is this assessment being conducted? Has any of Fordingbridge, Godshill and Hyde been surveyed? And are residents being engaged in the process? Our experience so far is that any assessment seems to be being carried out without any engagement with the local community, who are unaware of when to expect an assessment, how they might highlight their particular circumstances to officers, where to find the result for their household and how to appeal.

Answer:

I am confident that our wheeled bins will present advantages that outweigh some of the perceived implications of the changeover. They will enable us to recycle more as a district, something that I hope we can all agree is essential. It will lead to less mess across the forest on collection days that so often results from our current environmentally unsustainable plastic bin bags being split by animals and birds. It will also present less of a health and safety risk to our dedicated and hard working bin crews.

I would call on all members of this Council to support the roll out and help reinforce some of this positive messaging to their constituents. As one Council we all have to do better to reduce our environmental impact, and I would hope that this is an issue that is above politics.

I expect that the absolute majority of New Forest homes will be able to accommodate our standardised offer. However, we also appreciate that there is a limited number of properties across the District that will not be suitable for the approved waste and recycling collection service. This is why we committed to carrying out a comprehensive survey of all properties to assess them for storage and access constraints associated with the use of wheeled bins.

The surveying of over 80,000 properties is a lengthy task and has now been ongoing since the summer 2023. The surveying is being carried out by Keep Britain Tidy, a leading environmental charity with experience of independently advising on such matters. Keep Britain Tidy have provided an efficient methodology and worked with us to build a bespoke survey for the New Forest.

Amongst other things, the survey accounts for properties with limited storage capacity, physical obstacles such as steps, and properties where access for the collection vehicles maybe limited.

The areas you mentioned, Fordingbridge, Godshill, and Hyde have all been partially surveyed so far and we expect that the surveying will be complete early in the spring and Keep Britain Tidy will then provide us with the survey results.

We will be writing to all householders ahead of the service go live to inform them of the containers they will receive; when they are likely to be delivered, and when the new collection service will start.

We have built into our timeline a period for residents who feel they have been offered the wrong service to raise any concerns, but the roll out will be based on facts and evidence, not personal preference. This period and process will be supported by waste advisors, who will be able to engage with residents to ensure the correct service is provided. We are currently finalising our timeline, but we know it is important to allow ample time for this process to take place ahead of the distribution of containers.

Note – this question was dealt with in writing in the absence of Cllr Blunden.

Question 9

From Cllr Haywood to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Cleary

Members will likely have read in the press of the closure, by its current owners Carlsberg Marstons, of the Ringwood Brewery on Christchurch Road in Ringwood. From January, brewing and distribution of Ringwood ales there will cease, brewing transferring to the Midlands and distribution transferring well outside our district, with the sad loss of 10 jobs. Ringwood Brewery is highly regarded around the world as a trailblazer in the revival of traditional English ale and is a popular brand throughout our country. It is a source of pride

for many in Ringwood and more widely in the New Forest. Can I ask the Leader what steps this council has taken to help retain this iconic brand in its home town?

Answer:

I share your concern that CMBC has taken the decision to close the iconic Ringwood brewery with such little notice.

As he says, the brewery puts Ringwood on the map as a popular brand throughout the country and is an important USP for the town at a time when our high streets need a diverse offer to thrive.

Clearly, there is a limited amount an authority can do in terms of the decisions of a private business to operate.

However, I am aware that there has been local interest in taking on the brewery through a consortium of interested parties and investors. I have committed to meet urgently with a representative of that consortium and as soon as I have done so I will ask officers to consider what, if any, actions we can take.

Second Questions

Question 10

From Cllr Rackham to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Cleary

Our residents have recently had to contend with flooding, cut off water supply, sewerage dumps in rivers on numerous occasions and now a major issue with sewerage collection at Totton. I wonder if the council can acknowledge that Southern Water seems unable to provide an adequate service and look again at how NFDC should be planning for ongoing help to residents with not only Flood Action Plans for each area but also Water Collection and Supply Emergency planning to further support the residents where Southern Water is unable to do so.

Answer:

I too, am very concerned about the recent events you have highlighted and the significant impact that this has had on our residents. This week, I, along with other Hampshire Local Authority Leaders, will be sending a letter to the Chief Executive of Southern Water.

This letter will set out our concerns over their performance and our diminished confidence in them, following the recent emergency responses affecting our communities. We will be proposing a meeting in the new year, in order for them to explain how they will learn from these past experiences and the improvements they have planned, to provide the service that our residents deserve.

To support this a thorough debrief and lessons learnt exercise is taking place at a multi-agency Local Resilience Forum level, following the water supply disruption incident in the Waterside area.

A report with findings will be presented to the Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, which will include cover the Council's own response during the incident and our recovery.

New Forest District Council officers work closely with Hampshire County Council and other partners, on how we continue to support our residents, identifying skills and assets within

communities and developing their community plans to help improve community resilience in the future.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on practical steps the Council can take to support local communities through emergency planning incidents, the Leader highlighted this as one of the areas for consideration as part of the Local Resilience Forum debrief and review.

Question 11

From Cllr Haywood to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate, Cllr Heron

When people face significant changes to their detriment, it is normal to expect that some change their behaviour to avoid that detriment. This behaviour change can also have indirect side effects in areas seemingly loosely connected to the change in question. Given the eye-watering increase in long stay parking charges, what modelling of such behaviour change has this council done, if so what did that modelling reveal, and does it anticipate any impact on its headline revenue increase from this?

Answer:

The revised car parking fees still compare well with neighbouring authorities and present excellent value for money. The council is not expecting a significant reduction in the usage of its car parks as a result but will monitor this as part of its regular financial reporting. In addition, as outlined in October's Cabinet report, a new Parking Strategy will be developed to inform the long term approach to provision of parking in NFDC. The Parking Task and Finish Group is meeting for the first time tomorrow to begin this work, which will include engagement with service users and other stakeholders.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on initiatives being explored by Town and Parish Councils to mitigate behaviour changes, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the role of Hampshire County Council as part of on-street car parking and the ability of all agencies to respond appropriately to any car parking displacement.