

**FULL COUNCIL – 7 SEPTEMBER 2020 – QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDERS  
UNDER STANDING ORDER 22A**

**First Questions**

**Question 1**

**From Cllr Malcolm Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Housing Services, Cllr Jill Cleary**

During the current pandemic with residents and tenants under lock down with the stress and strains that environment brings how many cases of neighbour disputes involving NFDC tenants has the authority dealt with from the lock down to the end of August? Also, how many were settled to the complainant's satisfaction?

Answer:

*The Government announced a national lockdown on March 23rd 2020 due to the Covid 19 Pandemic. This understandably has had a direct impact on all members of society. The enforced isolation, with household members having to spend almost all their time indoors together along with children being unable to access education, has exacerbated tensions within communities. This is evident in the increase of neighbour complaints received by the Council during the period from March 23rd to August 31st.*

*The Council's Housing Estates Team received 407 initial reports of nuisance incidents between March 23rd and August 31st.*

*Of these, 88 cases warranted further investigation. 57 of these cases remain active and the other 31 have been closed with a satisfactory resolution.*

*Additionally, during this period, 145 tenancy warning letters were issued to identified sources of nuisance.*

*The response to each complaint is dealt with on a case by case basis, recognising the particular complexity that each case brings. To achieve lasting and effective outcomes, the process and time required is often multi-faceted, and requires the support and intervention of other agencies including the Police, Children Services, Mental Health teams etc. During lockdown, the responses of these external support agencies have been varied. However the Council continued to provide its full services. Whilst this was a challenge, my Housing Teams continued to provide support to our tenants and the communities within which they live.*

*Even during lockdown, NFDC continued to build resilience within its Housing Support team by adding new staff including a Complex Support Co-ordinator who works alongside tenants, homeless households and public sector agencies to mitigate and resolve issues within communities. Within the Housing Teams, there is great expertise and experience in dealing with these sorts of issues to try and reach positive outcomes that allow people to live in harmony.*

*Members, I believe most sincerely that my Housing Teams have risen superbly to the challenge of dealing with an increase in neighbourhood disputes and complaints arising out of the Covid 19 Pandemic and we will continue to put our efforts into resolving these.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question relating to local concerns in Hythe and Dibden, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that she would personally investigate the concerns outside of the meeting.*

## **Question 2**

**From Cllr Jack Davies to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Infrastructure, Cllr Edward Heron**

Does the Portfolio Holder agree with me that the Government's proposed changes to Planning law removes the right of local people to have a say in the planning process and will he write to both New Forest MPs urging them to oppose these proposals?

*Answer:*

*The Government has set out for consultation major proposals to reform the planning system. The deadline for response is 29 October. The proposals, if implemented, would arguably represent the most significant changes to the English planning system since its inception in 1947.*

*The Government is aiming to speed up the delivery of housing whilst enhancing quality. These aims are supported. However the proposals within the White Paper will not deliver these aims.*

*I have asked officers to prepare a detailed Cabinet paper setting out the changes proposed to the system, this will come to the October Cabinet meeting. The White Paper proposes that plans designate "growth", "renewal" and "protection areas". In addition to specifying uses, plans would specify heights / density and potentially more detailed design guidance. This would link to the proposals for 'permission in principle' in growth and possibly renewal areas. I believe that this approach will slow down the 'plan making' part of the process rather than speeding it up. It would also make it very difficult to set such guidance across urban areas, where such considerations are influenced by the local context. Once that Plan is adopted then permission in principle exists. Community engagement would need to occur at the Plan Making stage. Whilst the right for local people to have their say is not removed the radical changes to the system would mean that local residents would have much less opportunity to have its say on individual developments within their immediate area.*

*I have grave concerns about the White Paper and will write to both New Forest MP's setting out the Council's concerns after the meeting of the Cabinet.*

*Note – this question was dealt with in writing in the absence of the Portfolio Holder.*

## **Question 3**

**From Cllr David Harrison to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Barry Rickman**

In the light of the financial stress to the Council of the post-Covid 19 situation can the Leader of the Council clarify their earlier plans to borrow £30m to invest in commercial property?

*Answer:*

*As we have seen from elsewhere on this Council agenda, despite the significance of the financial implications the coronavirus has had on the Council, we have produced a revised balanced budget for 2020/21. In support of the medium term financial plan, the Council's strategy to invest in commercial property for the purposes of achieving economic generation within the district and an additional income source to the Council is still a sound strategy for an administration who take a long term view. Yes the investments may be financed by borrowing if required, according to the adopted strategy.*

#### **Question 4**

##### **From Cllr Caroline Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for Community Affairs, Cllr Diane Andrews**

What will be expected in terms of service delivery for community grant recipients this year? How are they going to be reassessed?

*Answer:*

*We have two aspects of the community grant, capital and revenue. Both grant schemes directly benefit local people and meet the objectives set out in our corporate plan. All applications are assessed and go through a robust grants procedure to identify the positive contribution that they make to the local New Forest community.*

*There are certain stipulations and recipients must prove the grant is being used for the purpose that has been agreed. We will also undertake an appraisal of each grant to ensure the key objectives have been met. For capital grants, applicants have to provide regular monitoring reports.*

*If applicants are reapplying this year, they will be asked to give details on how they have used the grant that they have previously received and how it has benefitted our communities. This is part of the continuing grants procedure. Those that are eligible to apply will meet with the Community Grants Task and Finish Group.*

*If an organisation has received a grant but does not reapply, they too will be asked to submit a report on their activities and how the funding has contributed to their work and benefitted our communities.*

*We do have an excellent relationship with all our community and voluntary organisations, and this process of check and balance has been very thorough.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question on the options for providing grant funds for more than a 12 month period, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that this would require the input of the Portfolio Holder with responsibility for finance.*

#### **Question 5**

##### **From Cllr Matt Kangarani to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Barry Rickman**

Can the Portfolio Holder give us some idea of the percentage of staff who have now returned to the office and whether working from home by staff is now accepted as part of the Council's long term strategy and will be reflected in staffing terms and conditions in the future?

*Answer:*

*Only essential staff have been working at Appletree Court, approximately 30/40 daily, about 10% of the total prior to the pandemic. Plans are being developed for more staff to return to ATC in a safe manner in October, the number on a daily basis is likely to be initially less than 50% perhaps growing over time. Our recent employee survey, indicated that 92% of staff were okay with working from home and 61% of staff found that they now actually enjoyed working from home. It is clear that the pandemic has identified that working from home is now, due to advancements in technology an acceptable part of the overall workspace and managers are working with staff to ensure they have the right ICT bundle to support working from home. The Council's Smarter Working strategy developed by the Council in 2018*

<https://democracy.newforest.gov.uk/documents/g6560/Public%20reports%20pack%2003rd-Oct-2018%2010.00%20Cabinet.pdf?T=10>

*highlighted the changing landscape of work, including how we use technology, space and working practices to deliver services to our residents and customers. How and where people work in the longer term will continue to be a focus. It is recognised that there are benefits, including financial to both the employer and the employee from staff working from home. These issues will be considered as part of the Councils' future recruitment and retention strategy.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question on the financial impact of home working on the Council, the Leader of the Council confirmed that some of this analysis had started.*

## **Question 6**

### **From Cllr Mark Clark to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Barry Rickman**

Can we be given a total figure on monies saved on specifically Councillor travel and subsistence expenses since the lockdown began? Given the last Full Council on July 6th has gained 481 views on YouTube, more than a small sized hall could hold, can we expect virtual meetings across the whole range of Council business to now be a fixture of permanent Council activity, given this now clearly aids public accountability?

*Answer:*

*A total of £1,070.10 was paid in councillors' travel and subsistence claims for the period 1 April – 31 August 2020. That is down from £8,314.03 for the same period in 2019. Therefore, the Council has made a comparable saving of just over £7,200.*

*I am as encouraged as Cllr Clark by the views this Council is attracting on its online meetings. As I mentioned in my earlier announcements, across all the virtual Council, Cabinet, Committee and Panel meetings, there have now been a total of 3,614 views and I am sure we will add to that number this evening. This demonstrates the interest from within the community for engagement in the democratic process.*

*Whilst we must also recognise that there are benefits to holding physical Council meetings, for the time being Virtual Meetings remain the safest way to continue with the business of this Council and I am pleased in the way both Members and Officers have adapted to deliver these meetings.*

*Looking to the future and the longer term, it is clear that whatever "normal" looks like for local authority public meetings, the Council must look to maintain and enhance the accessibility to them by making the best use of technology.*

*The Council has already made the commitment, through the Smarter Working agenda, to modernise and make the best use of technology as part of the democratic process. It should now be recognised that one opportunity that this crisis has presented, has been to accelerate and continue with this work.*

## **Question 7**

### **From Cllr Alex Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Community Affairs, Cllr Diane Andrews**

With new ways of working likely to become part of how this Council moves forward, what consideration is being given to providing accessible and modern approaches to Customer Service? Will we look at having zoom meetings with residents who have to self isolate, or

unable to travel to Appletree court, offer flexible hours for our staff and residents. And consider more pop up service provision within our towns and villages as we try and maintain a high level of engagement with residents during the pandemic?

Answer:

*Reviewing how we deliver services to our customers is a priority for all areas of the Council. You will know we have recently invested in a new website that enables our customers to transact with us more effectively, when it is most convenient to them. During the pandemic, many changes have been made, we have a Skype facility at Appletree Court so that customers who need to have a face to face meeting with housing services can do this via Skype in our meeting room. We have opened three of our information offices, and a further five run by towns and parishes, all in a Covid safe way to ensure those residents who were not able to transact with us via phones or on-line, continue to be able to engage with the Council. In housing customers are able to upload documents easily using their phones, again enabling them to transact with the Council in the simplest way. This has proved popular and we will continue to innovate and endeavour as we move forward to keep the people we care about connected to this Council.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question on further engagement opportunities, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the high levels of engagement undertaken by the Council despite the Covid challenges, but welcomed further engagement from councillors on any areas for improvement.*

#### **Question 8**

**From Cllr Stephanie Osborne to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Infrastructure, Cllr Edward Heron**

The Vision for the Waterside shows a willingness to bring funding and improvements in to the area which are welcome. However, can the Portfolio Holder advise how we can ensure any future employment and skills opportunities for local residents can be as wide ranging as possible, and not limited to the organisations sat on the Vision working group? What actions can he and the Council take to help engage employers to consider the Waterside as a location?

Answer:

*The Vision document sets out the outcomes we are seeking to deliver across the Waterside. Significant further work will be required setting out in detail how these outcomes are going to be delivered and what work the Council needs to do.*

*Providing local jobs for local people is critical as well as the ensuring that there are training and upskilling opportunities for the local communities. An Employment and Skills Plan is already embedded in the draft Section 106 that is currently being agreed with the Fawley applicants. Looking at how Employment and Skills Plans are delivered across all development within the District is one of the matters that I have asked the Chief Planning Officer to do some further work on. I have also asked that a full report is prepared to identify all the council led workstreams that are needed to support the delivery of the outcomes set out in the Vision document.*

*Note – this question was dealt with in writing in absence of the Portfolio Holder.*

#### **Question 9**

**From Cllr Hilary Brand to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Cllr Michael Harris**

Please can the Economy Portfolio Holder explain to the Council what they are doing to ensure that Forestry England will have their 10 New Forest Campsites up and running by April 2021?

Answer:

*Together with all partners we are in discussions with Forestry England, to ensure all campsites are up and running for 2021. As a direct result of your question today I have asked the Chief Planning Officer to write directly to Forestry England and will copy you into the answer to that letter. It is so important to the whole economy in the New Forest to resolve this issue.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question on the prospect of the Council running the campsites, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that he would ask this question of officers.*

**Question 10**

**From Cllr Sue Bennison to the Portfolio Holder for Housing Services, Cllr Jill Cleary**

Are you any nearer completing your hopes for a Mother and Baby Unit in New Milton?

Answer:

*Thank you for your question and it is very timely as I am visiting our almost complete new Mother and Baby facility this coming Friday with a small number of officers and immediate local members. I would have loved to have invited all Cllrs to see what great work is going on in creating these new facilities and other temporary accommodation but with the Covid 19 situation, this is not possible at this time. However following this visit, we will be arranging for Members to have a virtual tour of this new facility at 129 Ashley Road, New Milton and also of our newly refurbished cottages at Jones Lane, Hythe. Officers will be taking a video recording of these facilities and I look forward to presenting this to you shortly. I think Members will be very surprised and pleased with what we have done.*

*As Members will know, it has always been my desire to create a specific and bespoke facility for homeless young mothers and babies who, as we have seen around the country, are often placed in completely unsatisfactory accommodation. I am determined that this Council will give these young mothers a chance to get their lives back on track and enable them to pursue their own dreams and fundamental to this, is having a decent home. Our new facility at Ashley Road contains 4 ensuite spacious individual units and has 2 communal kitchens, all constructed to very good standards. Whilst this will be temporary accommodation, we will be actively engaging with other agencies as well as our own Support Team within Housing Services, to help these young mothers get the life skills they need to move onwards and upwards. My Housing Teams have worked hard to bring my vision alive and I am very pleased that we are on the cusp of opening this new facility.*

**Question 11**

**From Cllr Philip Dowd to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Regulatory Services, Cllr Alison Hoare**

Will the Portfolio Holder reassure residents in my ward that the District Council has a comprehensive flood defence strategy covering all coastal and waterway land it has responsibility for? Where may residents access this information?

Answer:

*The councillor's ward is Dibden and Hythe East, within this ward there are no defences that are managed by the coastal team as the foreshore frontage is either undefended or privately owned.*

*However, across the district the Council has adopted two Shoreline Management Plans (SMPs), these identify the future flood and erosion risks that under various scenarios may happen over a 100 year period. The SMPs set out high level management policies for our coastline, they are however, non-statutory and independent of government funding.*

*The SMPs that take in the NFDC coastline are:-*

*Poole & Christchurch Bay, which covers Hurst Spit to Dursilton Head - <http://twobays.net/>*

*North Solent SMP, which covers Hurst Spit to Selsey Bill and the Member's ward - <http://www.northsolentsmp.co.uk/15867>*

*Both of these are available online and can be accessed via the NFDC website "coastal management" pages.*

*Coastal flooding falls under the responsibility of the Environment Agency, further information can be found under .gov.uk where there are many documents relating to national flood and coastal erosion risk management policy.*

*Of particular interest will be the National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy for England. This a new document that was laid before Parliament on 14th July 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management-strategy-for-england--2>*

## **Question 12**

**From Cllr Alexis McEvoy to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Cllr Michael Harris**

*I recently read that HM Treasury was requiring local Councils to return any unspent Discretionary Grant Fund monies. These monies were intended to support businesses struggling with the economic impacts caused by Covid 19.*

*How much, if any of these monies will be returned to HM Treasury by this Council?*

*Answer:*

*We will not be returning any funds for this scheme. Of the discretionary grant monies we had just over £2m, getting that money to as many businesses that had fallen between the gaps of the other funds the Government made available to support businesses as a result of Covid-19.*

*I can confirm that following the final round which focused on those premises with a rateable value of above £51k, we spent our entire budget and therefore will not be returning any funds. In real numbers, this amounts to 351 grants paid to businesses.*

*It's worth mentioning that the Rates Related Grant Scheme has now also closed with the deadline to apply having been on Friday. Under this scheme we issued £41.1m to around 97.3% of those eligible businesses in the New Forest. Payments were made to 3410 business.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question relating to the number of businesses NFDC was able to support across the various schemes, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that this was a total of 3,761.*

## **Second Questions**

### **Question 13**

#### **From Cllr Mark Clark to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Barry Rickman**

Is the Council aware of the last minute changes to the law to grant emergency planning permission for it to build a number of 'temporary' (up to five years) 'No Deal' Brexit lorry parks in 29 Council areas. These designated council areas include Hampshire County Council and Southampton City Council.

Does this Council therefore know of any such potential parks which might adversely affect the NFDC area and have there been any discussions with those Councils about the implications of these possible arrangements?

*Answer:*

*The Council is not aware of any such parks, within the New Forest area.*