

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

First Questions

Question 1

From Cllr Keith Craze to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Barry Rickman

Given the communications that the Council's COVID-19 Recovery Task and Finish Group established with local businesses this year, when looking at the current potential future business environment, how effective has establishing a mutual rapport been and will be?

Answer:

I have been delighted by the positivity, debate and sharing of information that has taken place in the Local Economy Task and Finish Group. Over the past months we have heard how a range of local businesses from different sectors and the impact Covid 19 has had on them. What we have learnt from the Task and Finish meetings has helped inform policies for discretionary grants and has also supported officers in securing additional grant funding from the LEP. However I am certain that as we move into 2021 the impact of Covid 19 will continue to be felt within our economy and the work of the Task and Finish Group has not finished! We know that key sectors of our economy, such as the hospitality sector, will require significant support over the coming months and the skills agenda will be more important than ever. The Council cannot solve these issues alone and it's critical that we collaborate with different partners sharing information, knowledge and resources to support the residents and businesses within our district. The Local Economy Task and Finish Group will continue to be a forum for bringing partners together to inform and prioritise how we support the economy of the New Forest in these unprecedented times.

Question 2

From Cllr Steve Clarke to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Regulatory Services, Cllr Alison Hoare

With the Government's recent announcement that the sale of new cars wholly powered by petrol and diesel will cease by 2030 and that £1.3bn will be invested in electric charging points, can I ask the Portfolio Holder what the Council can do, to assist this change from petrol or diesel to a more sustainable form of transport?

Answer:

In terms of our priorities, a reduction in vehicle journeys must be our main focus and we have achieved that this year internally with the number of staff that we now have who can work from home. But we are aware that people especially in our rural communities will still need to travel to our local Towns and Villages and therefore the Council has been planning for this announcement for some time. I am pleased to report that the installation of 25 electric vehicle charging points in 9 of our car parks with improved signage and bay markings was completed last Friday 4th December with all 25 units now available for the public to use.

Note – in response to a supplementary question in relation to future installations, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that four new spaces had been approved in Lyndhurst with charging points, expected to be completed by the middle of 2021. Furthermore, a new rapid charging point would be replacing the existing one in the Ringwood Furlong car park. The Council's Planning

Department were requiring applications to make provision for charging points and it was expected that a more detailed update could be made to the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel in early 2021.

Question 3

From Cllr Neil Tungate to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Investment and Corporate Services, Cllr Jeremy Heron

Is this Council proposing to migrate from Skype to Microsoft Teams in the near future?

Answer:

From 18 January 2021 next year, all video conferencing will migrate to Microsoft Teams. The migration process for this is well underway. This upgrade is ahead of the original planned timescales for the work in 2023, which has been brought forward due to the emerging ICT requirements of the Council. The roll out of Microsoft Teams is part of the Council's ongoing investment in ICT, which has already seen our data storage virtualised in a public cloud, the replacement of HR software and a new Accounting platform. The telephony system has been updated to allow calls to be answered wherever an internet connection can be made. However, ICT is not static. To remain up to date, we must continue to evolve which is why a paper was taken through Cabinet last month which showed a further forecast expenditure of £2.17m, as we need to see both our content management and regulatory services systems replaced. Without the investment made in ICT, this Council could not have maintained the delivery of services for the community that it did through the past year.

Question 4

From Cllr Arthur Davis to the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Cllr Michael Harris

How many businesses in the New Forest in general and in Totton in particular have been supported by the Local Restrictions Support Grant?

Answer:

There are two grants being distributed at this time. The Local Restrictions Grant is to all businesses, paid on the basis of a calculation against business rates. The Additional Restrictions Grant picks up those businesses not covered by a business rate calculation via a local scheme. As of the end of 7 December, 1,411 businesses have been paid a total of £2,173,382 through the Local Restrictions Support Scheme. We have also issued a further £90,394 to an additional 85 businesses under the Additional Support Scheme.

Turning to Totton in particular, as of the 2 December, 93 businesses had received a total of £139,050.

Question 5

From Cllr Ann Bellows to the Portfolio Holder for Housing Services, Cllr Jill Cleary

Following on from the PM's recent announcement to put the green agenda at the fore of what we do as a nation, could the Housing Portfolio Holder tell me what we are doing, as a Housing Authority, to respond to the green agenda?

Answer:

This is a very timely question and I thank the member for it. Members will be aware that, as Housing Authority, we assume a number of roles. Not only do we own a large number of council dwellings, we are also building new properties. We also have responsibilities for the Private Sector who will need to react so that, they too, implement better ways of ensuring more energy efficient homes to contribute to the ultimate objective of net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Members, whilst 2050 might seem a very long way off, the hard work must start now. That is why the newly created Council's Greener Housing Task and Finish Group was set up. That Group, under the Chairmanship of the Chairman of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Panel, is leading the way when it comes to this Council proactively taking steps to play its part, as Housing Authority, in bringing about a greener housing environment. That Group has already put in place an ambitious Work Programme to analyse and understand what more we can and must do, to rise to the challenge of significantly reducing our carbon emissions. They will be looking at how best to go about retrofitting our existing stock recognising that this Council is already carrying out work to make our council stock greener through our extensive medium and longer term programme of capital works, which includes better insulated roofs, more efficient boilers and of course, double glazing.

We will also be looking critically when we build new properties to make sure the build standards that we adopt, produce energy efficient homes with real cost benefits to our tenants in running them.

We will also be looking to use our influence in persuading the Private Sector to likewise think green when it comes to their own housing. There are a huge raft of measures, including grants, that the Government are pushing and we will play our part in assisting the take-up in this regard.

Members, coming out of the Greener Housing Task and Finish Group will be a Greener Housing Strategy, which I am delighted about. This will complement our other Housing Strategies and demonstrate that this Council means business when it comes to delivering excellent Housing Services.

Question 6

From Cllr Neville Penman to the Portfolio Holder for Community Affairs, Cllr Diane Andrews

How has the pandemic effected the number of installations of Careline units?

Answer:

The installation of careline services between March and November 2019 in comparison for the same period this year shows a decrease of 22% in new customer installations. This reduction is attributed to the Government lockdown in March of this year. Although Appletree Carelines was deemed to be an essential service, the main customer cohort fell into the shielding group of being clinically vulnerable or extremely clinically vulnerable. Whilst protecting those most at risk from Covid 19, this initially reduced the installation of new services to customers.

Following a review of operational procedures and the undertaking of comprehensive risk assessments, this enabled careline installations to resume to near normal levels. From August of this year, careline installations were increasingly higher year on year. Following the second lockdown, this again impacted and reduced new careline installations.

Overall, the comparison of new installations between August and November of this year, with that of 2019, show a small decrease of just over 3%.

Appletree Careline continues to provide much needed care monitoring and response services for our most vulnerable residents at this difficult time in a Covid compliant manner. The focus is now on widening the traditional customer base to increase installations over the coming months.

The team recently received praise and thanks from the family of an Appletree Careline customer, who having sadly endured a burglary, activated their lifeline for assistance. The team were able to quickly deploy help with the Police having detained the person responsible. It is responses like this that demonstrates not only the reassurance and benefit of Appletree Careline 24 hour service, but also the additional protection it provides to its customers.

Question 7

From Cllr Caroline Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Infrastructure, Cllr Edward Heron

The last time parking in Totton town centre was discussed Cllr Heron said he would be undertaking some consultation and would take that into account before making the decision about imposing charges on our car parks. I wonder how many people Cllr Heron has managed to consult with and how many of them agreed that charges would be a good idea?

Answer:

The consultation was undertaken in accordance with that set out in my Decision Report of 11 September. That included notification to statutory consultees such as the County Council, bus companies, the Road Haulage Association etc. Letters were sent to 21 businesses located adjacent to the car park, a notice was placed in a local publication (Hampshire Independent) which was published on 23 October, the consultation was published on the Council's website, and most importantly, notices were placed in all the affected car parks. From that, seven objections were received in response to the Council's proposals. Along with that, I did meet with a resident in Totton who is a business owner, at a ward councillor's request and I have been talking to people about these proposed changes. There are some businesses which are very concerned about charges within Totton. When many of those are explained the long and short stay clock options, many of their concerns are alleviated. But also, speaking to other people across the District who have been paying for parking for quite a number of years, they are somewhat surprised that there has not been a level playing field with Totton in this regard.

Note – in response to a supplementary question in relation to a possible delay to the introduction of charges, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the significant debate on this issue at the recent Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel and confirmed that he did not intend to revisit the timing in light of the fairness across the District of the approach.

Question 8

From Cllr Alex Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Wellbeing, Cllr Mark Steele

As I have experience as a past member of the Task & Finish Group in the previous Administration looking at the leisure centre privatisation process I was appalled to see the customer focus group set up at that time now refusing to be part of the process and the

recent closure, due to the Covid virus. Is it really possible to continue to with process which seeks to privatise the management of those leisure centres? Isn't it time to stop and wait until it will be possible to more accurately predict future income and strategy for the leisure centres?

Answer:

We are of course disappointed that the Customer Focus Group (CFG) feel they cannot continue but we respect their decision. We will continue to invite the CFG members to our next stakeholder meeting and we are planning to hold virtual customer forums in mid-January with any preferred bidder, which will be publicised in early January. I know that some CFG members have already indicated that they will attend the customer forums. Input from the CFG was very valuable, and feedback from them has been reflected in work on the review at each stage.

The service has for many years been an excellent health and leisure service for the area, but with a subsidy. This position continues to be unsustainable. The partnering procurement process has shown that bidders can provide a service that meets the Council's objectives of 'working with partners to create active communities by providing affordable, accessible leisure facilities, dedicated to improving physical and mental health and wellbeing and establishing a sustainable healthy lifestyle legacy for future generations.'

Best and Final Offers from bidders are due on the 9th December, the bids will then be fully evaluated and discussed with the Task and Finish Group.

Note – in response to a supplementary question in relation to due diligence, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that the objective has always been about sustaining the future health and leisure services and therefore it was only right to wait until the conclusion of the procurement process.

Question 9

From Cllr Mahmoud Kangarani to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Barry Rickman

Following the extraordinary admission made to the Council's recent Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel of £225,000 of public funding going to a single organisation without anything to show for it, is it now time for this Conservative Administration to give up its fox role in the henhouse, and allow Opposition Members of this Council to chair independent scrutiny committees, normal in other Councils, to ensure that this disastrous mistake never happens again?

Answer:

With regard to the Chairmen of Overview and Scrutiny Panels, the election of a Chairman for each of this Council's four Overview and Scrutiny Panels is a matter for each Panel to determine at their first meeting following the Council's Annual Meeting in May. Other Councils was mentioned in the question so it is worth noting that the nearby authority of Eastleigh (Liberal Democrat administration) have all of their Overview and Scrutiny Committees chaired by Liberal Democrat Councillors. However I would like to reiterate that it is a matter for each Overview and Scrutiny Panel or Committee in any local authority to determine who the right person is for the position of Chairman.

In response to a supplementary question about future arrangements, the Leader of the Council was confident that the proper procedures had been followed in this subject and

remained in the view that providing specific space within the District for innovation and start up businesses was critical to the local economy.

Question 10

From Cllr Malcolm Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Regulatory Services, Cllr Alison Hoare

Can the Portfolio Holder advise what our current carbon footprint is and the amount it has been affected by operational changes due to Covid-19?

Answer:

Thank you for your question which is very topical given the last 9 months of living in very difficult times and working in very alternative ways. The CO2 for our vehicle fleet which comprises of 190 vehicles has remained fairly static over the COVID 19 period with the majority of vehicles still being used for their daily tasks and on occasions additional hired vehicles needed for increased cleaning activities and social distancing of operational staff. I am pleased to report that the trial of the 4 electric vehicles is progressing well with the vehicles covering 41,500 miles in the last 12 months with associated savings of 10,130 kg on CO2 emissions compared to an equivalent Diesel vehicle.

Where we have seen significant differences is in our buildings, where we can see that for the first half of 2019/20 financial year the amount of CO2 produced was 1,346 tonnes, but this has reduced to 907 tonnes for the first half of this financial year, an overall decrease of 33% - (38% at the health and leisure centres). The main reason for this is the reduction in the use of our buildings due to the ability for staff to work from home as well as Leisure centres being closed for a period of time during the first lockdown.

There is a relationship to expenditure as well as we can also see a reduction on gas and electricity costs over the same two periods which have decreased by 18% when comparing the 1st half of 2020/21 with 2019/20.

Note – in response to a supplementary question regarding the Council's overall carbon footprint, the Portfolio Holder confirmed she would be happy to supply this outside of the meeting once confirmed.

The following questions fell outside of the 30 minute time limit and were dealt with in writing:-

Question 11

From Cllr Jack Davies to the Portfolio Holder for Housing Services, Cllr Jill Cleary

Based on the assumption that a third of the 600 affordable properties the council aims to deliver by 2026 will be social housing (although there is no guarantee of there even being that many) it will take more than 50 years for the Council to meet current demand for social housing across the district. Does the Portfolio Holder accept that the current rate at which this council delivers social housing is not good enough?

Answer:

Before addressing our own position on affordable housing delivery, a couple of wider points are worth making.

Firstly, it must be remembered that we are not the only affordable housing provider operating in the New Forest.

Whilst we are certainly working VERY hard to establish the Council as the preferred provider of affordable housing in every situation, Housing Associations are also actively pursuing openings and providing homes for rent and shared-ownership in our District. Last year Sovereign Housing Association provided homes for rent in Fordingbridge and this year, both Vivid and Sovereign have rented homes coming forward. Aster are also progressing a larger scale development of homes for rent and shared ownership to serve Totton. Our relationships with Housing Associations operating in our District are very positive and it is right that this is so, after all, this Council gets allocations rights to the affordable housing that they bring forward. People on our Housing Register directly benefit from these allocations.

Secondly, we are all aware of the commitments and policies that have been made to affordable housing in our Local Plan, as part of larger market housing developments. Whilst it is difficult to predict just how many of these affordable homes will come forward and how soon, we expect a significant number to be provided for rent, including Social Rent.

So what of our own “in-house” delivery plans?

Our ambition to achieve at least 600 additional council owned homes by 2026 is modelled on our financial capacity as well as our estimated delivery capacity. In the first two years of the 8 year programme, we proudly delivered 147 homes from a variety of sources and all of these were delivered for social rent. This year we have the scope to deliver another 45 homes for social rent so we are already within a hairs breadth of our overall 8 year tenure target, but we won't stop there.

As Members of the Cabinet will know, our very first homes for Shared Ownership and Affordable Rent are in the process of completing and these new tenures will sit comfortably alongside our homes for social rent.

These new models, not only meet a Housing Strategy objective and broaden our scope as an affordable housing provider, they also enable us to optimise our financial capacity, AND to compete for more opportunities, giving greater access to openings that could include homes for social rent.

Members, we are actively working alongside Homes England to maximise grant funding and already, we have had tremendous success in this regard. This helps our money go further. Members, this Administration will do all it can to help those in housing need within our District. We are making great strides like never before and I am most proud of our achievements.

Question 12

From Cllr Hilary Brand to the Portfolio Holder for Housing Services, Cllr Jill Cleary

In September 2019, more than 3000 people were on the waiting list for social housing. Following the move to a new system from January 2020 where every existing applicant was made to submit a new application, that number has now fallen to fewer than 2000. Does the Portfolio Holder accept that such a massive drop indicates many people on the waiting list have not been able to register for this new system?

Answer:

Members, this is also a timely question as we near the first anniversary of the Council's new housing allocation system. The new Allocation Policy, approved by Full Council in April 2019, was the first major policy change since the launch of Choice Based Lettings in the District in 2002. The policy required a comprehensive overhaul to meet changing housing demands and our strategic aims to reduce homelessness.

As Members will know, during the consultation period, we made it clear we fully expected the number of applicants on the register to reduce as a result of prioritising those households in housing need. Following comprehensive reviews of the existing applicant base, we identified a significant number of dormant applications, or applicants who were not in housing need, which the previous system permitted. As an example, one applicant had remained on the register for 24 years, without placing a single bid for a home.

Our plans to support existing applicants to re-apply were presented to both members and our Multi-agency Homelessness Forum, who all gave their full support to the extensive methods made available to these existing applicants. Vulnerable households, who did not apply, were all contacted and assisted in person where necessary, to ensure they got on the new Register.

Members, since January this year we have verified and approved 1,500 applications, with 300 of those households being housed or offered a social housing property. We continue to support 100s of vulnerable people each year with their applications. The new allocation policy and system is ensuring those in the most need secure a home and I applaud it.

Question 13

From Cllr Stephanie Osborne to the Portfolio Holder for Housing Services, Cllr Jill Cleary

Can the Portfolio Holder for Housing conduct a review of the way individuals can be assisted when applying for housing?

Several examples that have come to light suggests that those who find completing forms correctly a great challenge or a struggle have been unfairly disadvantaged. Especially since the NFDC office in Hythe was closed throughout the pandemic.

Answer:

Members, I would like to reassure you that advice and assistance with applying to the housing register is very much part and parcel of the support provided by both the Homesearch and Homelessness Teams. As Portfolio Holder, I know first hand, of many vulnerable households who have been promptly and carefully guided through the application process.

Members will be reassured that our team of officers are able to take applications over the phone where the applicant has no other way of being supported. We have set up further sources of help through our longstanding partnership with Citizens Advice and in Hythe, we established drop-in sessions at The Crossings, which have now recommenced, and whose volunteers have supported many applicants apply.

Members, we greatly value the work of The Crossings in the Hythe community and just recently supported them, and subsequently congratulated them, on their successful bid to receive Government funding to support homeless households in the local community. We

look forward to continuing our work alongside them in supporting vulnerable people in our area.

Question 14

From Cllr Sandra Delemare to the Portfolio Holder for Housing Services, Cllr Jill Cleary

Referring to Cllr Osborne's question on housing, can the whole process be reviewed and made easier with neighbouring Councils and more available for residents to downsize and upsize as their situations change? Death of partner, family size increasing, or the need to relocate for work or to be near relatives for care. This seems to be a common and efficient method in those European countries where renting properties seems to be much more common.

For example: An NFDC resident has a 3 bed property and garden and would like to relocate to a 1 bed flat in Eastleigh thereby freeing up that property to the NFDC. However, their health and mental health situation means any barriers would be too upsetting to endure.

Answer:

Members, there are a number of options available to such a tenant in this situation. During our Allocation Policy review we recognised that freeing up under-occupied social housing would increase the supply of much needed family housing. As a result, we gave greater priority to those wishing to move within the New Forest, by awarding them a Band 2 priority, to help move them much quicker to more suitable accommodation.

I am sure many Members will know that moving from social housing in one local authority area to another is also possible through the Mutual Exchange process. This is a well established process and works well.

Members, I am happy to ask the Service Manager for Housing Options to make contact with Cllr Delemare so that we can offer personalised advice and support to assist the tenant with her proposed move.

Second Questions

Question 15

From Cllr Alex Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Regulatory Services, Cllr Alison Hoare

As the survey closes this week for the Waste Strategy proposals, does the Portfolio Holder agree that the consultation for this important issue should have been more accessible for residents unable to access the online survey or visit information offices? And that many affected residents won't have their voices heard? And that four weeks ahead is simply not long enough?

Answer:

The engagement period will have run for over 4 weeks once it comes to a close on 10th December. The aim of the survey is to gather views on how the "preferred option" which was agreed by the cross party Task and Finish Group, for waste and recycling collections would affect them. The results of this survey can then be taken into account in the Council's future decision making, alongside more detailed financial information, to determine how we will meet our environmental aims and comply with future legislation.

The survey has been available online and in hard copy format available from information offices, and we have also sent out survey forms in the post to residents who have requested this, to ensure that everyone who wishes to provide feedback can do so. Officers from the Council have also fully engaged with the Council's refuse collection teams who have also been given the opportunity to provide feedback. The consultation has also been advertised in the local papers and radio.