

**FULL COUNCIL – 19 JULY 2021 – QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDERS UNDER
STANDING ORDER 22A**

First Questions

Question 1

**From Cllr Ann Bellows to the Portfolio Holder for Business, Tourism and High Streets,
Cllr Michael Harris**

Many businesses in the Fordingbridge area are concerned, like me, at the ending of the Government Furlough Scheme in September. Whilst the economy gets back on its feet, continued social distancing will have a negative impact on businesses. This will be particularly true for businesses in the hospitality sector of which there are many in the New Forest. What help if any can be provided to those businesses in the future?

Answer:

The hospitality sector plays an important role in the economy of the New Forest. As a sector they have been significantly impacted by the Pandemic. Therefore, as a Council we will do all we are able to do in order to support this sector to be able to recover. There have been a number of recent local initiatives to address the labour supply issue in this sector, for example there was a very successful jobs fair held at the Balmer Lawn Hotel, aimed at the hospitality sector. The Council will continue to look at initiatives and work with partners to support the hospitality sector. Indeed, we aim to work with all sectors that make up the economy of the New Forest. Considerable support has already been given to this sector through several rounds of Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) funding. There will be a further ARG funding award to NFDC later in the summer. I am confident that this sector will fall within the criteria that these funds should be directed towards.

Question 2

**From Cllr Christine Ward to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness
Services, Cllr Jill Cleary**

Can the Portfolio Holder for Housing please reassure Members that post covid, vulnerable homeless households accommodated over the last year and beyond will continue to be assisted with suitable accommodation and practical support?

Answer:

As Members will know, this Council made it a priority to support the most vulnerable in our community during this most testing time.

Since the height of the pandemic in March 2020, and in support of the 'Everyone In' campaign, we have accommodated 256 households into Emergency Accommodation and supported many of these households into more secure accommodation. The Council's 2019 strategic commitment to ending rough sleeping has been fully embraced with over 70 of these placements provided to rough sleepers who required a safe place to socially distance and protect their health and wellbeing.

I am sure Members will be delighted to hear that Central Government, through the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, has supported this Council with additional funding, in recognition of the excellent work our frontline teams provide to vulnerable people.

This has only been possible because of the positive relationships that have been established with the Government's advisers in promoting the needs of the District to attract the funding our area deserves.

This funding has enabled us to expand our Housing Support Team culminating in the opening of our very first supported housing project in Lymington, where homeless people will get dedicated support, provided by this Council. Members, for the first time we have a dedicated pathway from the street, to supported accommodation and then on to settled accommodation.

We have also built upon our strategic partnership with local mental health services to secure funding for a new joint mental health practitioner role which will provide direct and prompt mental health support to those in crisis or who have unmet mental health needs, and who are facing homelessness. This qualified mental health practitioner will be embedded within the Council's homeless team and link directly into the community mental health teams in the District. I truly believe this will make an amazing difference to people's lives.

Members, you will see that 'prevention' and 'early intervention' is a key feature of our approach. Since March 2020 this Council has prevented 315 households from becoming homeless.

We continue to open more of our own Council temporary accommodation across the District and 6 buildings now open providing 32 units in Blackfield, Hythe, New Milton and Lymington, with a further 15 to come this financial year in Ringwood, New Milton and Blackfield.

Members, I'm sure you will agree with me that our homeless service goes from strength to strength and I am very proud to be the Portfolio Holder for this crucially important service.

Question 3

From Cllr Malcolm Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Coastal Services, Cllr Steve Davies

How has this Administration allowed its operational headcount to reduce to the point it can no longer maintain the garden waste collections as an upfront "paid for service"? Why was there no monitoring of the situation to allow mitigation action to take place to avoid this outcome? How confident is he that the service will resume in full, in four weeks' time?

When was this issue placed on the Council's risk register, and would he agree that in the light of this failure of service provision, the Council's business resilience planning needs a complete overhaul?

Answer:

In recent weeks the national shortage of HGV drivers has been well documented in the media. Unfortunately, this has arisen in a "perfect storm" of COVID, Brexit and an ageing workforce nationally. The Road Haulage Association estimates there is now a shortage of 100,000 drivers in the UK.

As a result, many local Councils have already seen impacts on their frontline waste and recycling services, and now this has been compounded with significant increases in COVID-related isolations. To illustrate, this Council is aware of many councils whose services have already been postponed or delayed, including Havant, Tonbridge and Malling, Souths Hams, Bristol, Coventry, and Redcar.

Over a number of weeks, the Council has been applying measures to minimise disruption to services despite the drop-off in staff availability. This has included utilising agency staff, re-deploying staff from other operational services, and cancelling or postponing non-essential services. The Council is also applying a salary enhancement for HGV drivers (the Market Supplement Portfolio Holder Decision has just been published) which we hope will minimise staff vacancies by retaining existing staff and will also attract new staff to the council. This will be applied at the beginning of August. A key part of our resilience planning is to identify a priority order for delivering services in circumstances such as this, and the Council has prioritised black and clear sack collections, core waste and recycling services.

A decision on recommencement has not yet been taken, but it will be based on available staffing levels as well as levels of COVID-19 isolations. At this time my confidence levels are what I would call positive. But right now I think it's difficult to predict the next week let alone the next month. But I know that the officers will continue to manage well given the constraints that we all have to endure.

Note – in response to a supplementary question relating to restoring confidence in the service, the Portfolio Holder considered that residents were understanding of the situation both nationally and locally that was putting pressure on waste collection across the county and country.

Question 4

From Cllr Alex Brunsdon to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Edward Heron

Residents in Lymington and Pennington are rightly concerned that this Conservative-run Council is rushing through the plans for a wildly unpopular replacement of the public toilets at Lymington Quay, Is the Conservative Councillor for Pennington, correct when he said on Facebook that Lymington Harbour Commissioners are pressuring the Council to finish the project as soon as possible so that they can charge full rates for the new pontoons which they have installed at Lymington Quay?

Answer:

Cabinet and I are reviewing this project and discussions are taking place with both the Harbour Commissioners and representatives of the local community. An announcement on the outcome of our review will be made shortly.

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

Question 5

From Cllr Jack Davies to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Coastal Services, Cllr Steve Davies

Many residents in Pennington have been in touch to report multiple missed green and residual waste collections with some households being forced to store two weeks' worth of waste. Please can the portfolio holder tell me what they are doing to fix the obvious failings and restore trust?

Answer:

See response to question 3.

Question 6

From Cllr Sandra Delemare to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Investment and Corporate Services, Cllr Jeremy Heron

It seems that all English local authorities spent £41.6 million on printing from April 2020 to February 2021, £32 million less than the previous financial year.

What are the comparisons for overall NFDC printing costs between 19/20 and 20/21?

Answer:

I can confirm that the figures provided to the Taxpayers Alliance under their Freedom of Information request were as follows:

2019/20 – £68,169

2020/21 – £49,528

A reduction of £18,641 or 27%. However, I should point out that, as with the figures you quoted, the data does not reflect the figures for a full year for 2020/21 but are for the period from April to February. Given that most local authorities issue their council tax documents in March, the missing month, this could significantly impact on the overall cost.

Question 7

From Cllr Rebecca Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness Services, Cllr Jill Cleary

In the Annual Performance Report under Housing Services, it mentions an increase in neighbour complaints from 123 to 407 during the period March to August 2020. Can you tell how many of those were deal with to the complainants' satisfaction?

Answer:

Following the Government's initial lockdown in March 2020, as Members will know, significant restrictions were implemented nationally affecting each and every one of us. Measures included the closures of schools, homeworking and the stay at home rule – all of which contributed significantly to increased community tensions and neighbour relations. The incompatibility of working at home, parents home educating children, alongside reports of residents not adhering to the social restrictions, saw a significant increase in complaints during the period of the first lockdown. Tenancy Management Officers within Housing Estates worked extremely hard to maintain services, both here at Appletree Court and within the community, throughout this period. Of the 407 complaints recorded, 5 cases remain open for long term intervention, of which 2 require alternative accommodation. 4 of the 5 cases are subject to a multi-agency approach due to their complexity of issues and needs. As restrictions ease, we will continue our 'hands-on' approach with assisting those who are experiencing problems and will do all that we can to encourage good relations within our community.

Note – in response to a supplementary question relating to a feedback and evaluation process, the Portfolio Holder committed to looking into this proposal.

Question 8

From Cllr Mahmoud Kangarani to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Investment and Corporate Services, Cllr Jeremy Heron

We note that DCLG has made it easier for councils to offer voluntary e-billing for council tax, by removing legal requirements to send voluminous documents by post with council tax bills. Councils can now use their legal powers to offer discounts or incentive schemes for e-billing. For example, Broadland District Council has converted over 3,000 residents to e-billing for council tax, working with the Woodland Trust to plant one tree for every 10 residents who switch. Is this an initiative the NFDC would and could support?

Answer:

Over the past five years New Forest District Council has made considerable investment in ICT, an investment that has paid dividends to the organisation and the people that we serve during this pandemic and as part of that investment a further three year strategy was agreed for the period 2020 to 2023 which will see a further £2.175m worth of investment, £848k thousand in the current financial year.

As part of a managed programme we are already evaluating the benefits of e-billing and this is likely to be included in a far wider delivery of accessibility during the second phase of our website remodelling, enabling access to a range of services and information that is tailored to the individual account thus ensuring that people are not frustrated by being asked to key in the same information over and over again.

Note – in response to a supplementary question relating to direct debit discounts, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that all options were being evaluated as part of the programme.

Question 9

From Cllr Philip Dowd to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Edward Heron

Will the Portfolio holder confirm when a revised date for a presentation over Southampton's bid to be the City of Culture 2025, and how the New Forest can get involved and ensure that we are part of this crucial event to showcase and improve Arts and Culture provision in the district? Also, with a new administration in place in the city, can we ensure that the New Forest is not forgotten in where options for improved facilities and events which will benefit the New Forest District.

Answer:

I am unable to provide a revised date for the presentation at this time. However, I am pleased to update Council that I met with the new Leader of Southampton City Council earlier this month to discuss their City of Culture 2025 bid and subsequently wrote on the 8th July to reaffirm this Council's support for the bid and provide an investment of £10,000 towards the upfront costs to enable the bid to be successful. I have asked that a copy of my letter be circulated to all Members.

Note – in response to a supplementary question relating to engagement with the Arts Council and the importance of music, the Leader confirmed that he would write to Cllr Dowd with a more detailed response with what the Council and local partners were doing, including the work of the Hampshire Music Service.

Question 10

From Cllr Hilary Brand to the Portfolio Holder for Business, Tourism and High Streets, Cllr Michael Harris

During the pandemic 36 million of discretionary funding was given out to support 60% of local business. What is NFDC doing to support the other 40%?

Answer:

The Council has been successful in administering discretionary funding across the district to support those businesses that have been most affected by the pandemic. The Council has given out support to over 60% of local businesses. However the impact of the pandemic has not been negative for all businesses, 40% of our businesses have not needed to receive support as they are either economically buoyant or have refocused their businesses to take advantage of some of the current opportunities within the market. The Council is committed to helping as many New Forest businesses as possible within the district either through discretionary grants or other forms of business support, we continue to monitor the impact that the pandemic is having on our economy to ensure that we do everything we are able to do to support businesses within the district.

Note – in response to a supplementary question relating to the rules on spending Covid grants, the Portfolio Holder committed to reviewing the rules, however, funds from central government often had strict parameters for use.

Question 11

From Cllr Caroline Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for Partnering and Wellbeing, Cllr Mark Steele

In a resident's survey recently conducted by the authority 96% of residents asked were satisfied or very satisfied regarding crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour in their area. How many residents within the survey does that 96% represent and what are they living?

Answer:

The Safer New Forest Strategy & Delivery Group undertake a number of annual community engagement events across the District. These events promote the work of the Partnership as well as providing residents the opportunity to raise any concerns they may have about crime and disorder or anti-social behaviour in their area. During these events, residents are invited to complete a satisfaction survey consisting of a number of questions pertinent to their experiences of crime and disorder. The questions remain the same year on year to show any measurable change in reported crime or perceptions of crime.

During 2020, partners engaged with over a 1000 residents of the New Forest during these events, with 146 completing the annual survey.

In addition to this, to ensure we picked up the views of young people, we launched an online survey which was distributed through educational providers and received 140 replies.

Also, in recognising the importance of our Towns and Parish Councils, an annual survey is distributed to all clerks inviting local views regarding crime & disorder and anti-social behaviour.

All of the findings from these surveys are published annually in the Safer New Forest Strategic Assessment which helps inform the priorities to address issues of crime and

disorder within the annual Partnership Plan. I am delighted to be able to play my part, as Chairman of the Safer New Forest Partnership, to help make the District a safer place for our residents.

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

Question 12

From Cllr Keith Craze to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Edward Heron

Given the perceived benefits for the New Forest area of the Freeport in Southampton, what are the current comments and thoughts of the Council Leader as to the potential benefits (upsides and downsides) to the implementation of the Freeport as some have raised concerns about the potentially positive impact of our support?

Answer:

I do not have much to add to the report that the Council will be considering later on this agenda. The Freeport can be of tremendous benefit to this District, not only in the 52,000 jobs that it is predicted to bring in, or the economic growth, although there are issues as identified within the report that we would need to look at pooling some of that growth in business rates. The work that will be done on the skills agenda will be positive, particularly around raising skills in the East of the District and particularly on the Waterside. The Freeport is a fantastic opportunity for the District and one I support.

Note – in response to a supplementary question relating to the business case deadline, the Leader of the Council was confident that the work would be completed on time.

Question 13

From Cllr Mark Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Regeneration and Infrastructure, Cllr Diane Andrews

I note on the planning file regarding the now partly occupied VIVID housing development on the Fawley Road, Hythe, the case officer has reversed their decision regarding the advice given to the developer VIVID's agent over 8 months ago, and that the NFDC now have little option but to accept a non Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) / Equality Act compliant access for the public open space.

The Case Officer had refused to discharge the proposals for the formal children's play equipment within the public open space. The reasons given are that it would require adjustments to ground levels, which could have a bearing on the site drainage. It was expected to have DDA compliant access.

Will the Portfolio Holder now please explain, in this case, why the updated planning advice now suggests that it would be inappropriate for VIVID, to carry out a degree of engineering works to the public open space as a whole, from the top level to the bottom of the slope, so as to provide a "DDA compliant access". As it stands, there are no new proposals.

Therefore, the public open space has no DDA or Equality Act compliant access. In my view, this has to be a clear case of discrimination against disabled people, young and old from using the area.

Answer:

I agree with you that this is far from satisfactory.

The open space at Forest Lodge Farm is still being negotiated with Vivid Homes. Because any changes to that play park will change the appearance and the character of the whole area. Furthermore, there would be an issue with how a DDA compliant access could be achieved. The planning team are working with Vivid to identify whether there are other opportunities to improve the play provision. I feel a play park, no matter how small is really important to a community. I will encourage a speedy conclusion to this disappointing situation and I will be in touch with you as soon as there is something to report.

Second Questions

Question 14

From Cllr Malcolm Wade to the Portfolio Holder for People and Places, Cllr David Russell

The amount of fly tipping has increased during 2020 and during 2020-2021 the authority issued 17 fixed penalty notices. What percentage of fly tipping incidents does this represents and what representation did the District Council make within Hampshire County Council's 'Balancing the Budget' consultation to ensure the waste tips remain as accessible as possible to all residents?

Answer:

There were 976 fly tips instances reported to NFDC in the past financial year (20/21). The 17 Fixed Penalty Notices issued represents 1.7% of the total instances. The Council also successfully prosecuted a fly tipper, this person is currently serving a prison sentence for a number of fly tipping offences within the District. We work closely with HCC on the management of its Waste and Recycling Centres to ensure that our residents have access to these facilities to enable them to dispose of waste responsibly.

Note – in response to a supplementary question relating to achieving a reduction of fly tipping in the District, the Portfolio Holder highlighted that the prosecution of a prolific fly tipper would have a positive impact, and further initiatives would be discussed at an upcoming Task and Finish Group.