

**FULL COUNCIL – 11 OCTOBER 2021 – QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDERS
UNDER STANDING ORDER 22A**

First Questions

Question 1

From Cllr Alex Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Regeneration and Infrastructure, Cllr Diane Andrews

The recent shortages we have seen in our shops has been ascribed to Brexit, but also to the lack of HGV drivers as well this Council knows to its own cost. Unlike Europe where truck drivers have facilities, to park, eat and sleep and shower, the UK is especially bad at providing such facilities.

In concert with Hampshire County Council, what facilities can this Council now provide for truck drivers to be able to park up at night safely with good facilities to ensure continued supplies of goods to our shops and garages?

Answer:

This issue is currently being raised in the transport industry's news, with Logistics UK suggesting that local authorities should recognise the important role in the planning process and permit applications for rest stops and parking areas in places where demand outstrips supply.

The National Planning Policy Framework states that planning policies and decisions should recognise the importance of providing adequate overnight lorry parking facilities, taking into account any local shortages, to reduce the risk of parking in locations that lack proper facilities or could cause a nuisance. Proposals for new or expanded distribution centres should make provision for sufficient lorry parking to cater for their anticipated use.

Local Plan Part 2 has now commenced and there has been a recent Call for Sites for a range of different land uses. This is a land use that could be considered as part of the Local Plan work. It should however be noted that such a use will only happen on sites where the use can be accommodated without harm to the environment and where the land owner is willing to use their land in this way. Land owners tend to use land for the use that gives them the greatest return on their investment. Planning will consider this matter as it starts to investigate the more detailed work around the issues that Local Plan Part 2 needs to consider to plan positively within the district. This work will inform an all member workshop later in the year. There will also be a discussion with Hampshire County Council to explore options for a more immediate solution.

Further to that, when you think of our road network, it is important to consider the roads we are talking about all of the time, many of which plough through the National Park.

Question 2

From Cllr Mark Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Investment and Corporate Services, Cllr Jeremy Heron

As Councillors will know by a visit to their local supermarket, food costs are soaring and energy bills are set to jump 12% from October. For years a Daddies sauce bottle used to be a quid. It's now £1.50.

Meanwhile, many of those on particularly low incomes – five million families were on universal credit at the most recent count – are receiving text messages or emails that their support will be cut by up to £1,040 a year from next month. Poorer residents have contacted me about how they go about contacting food banks.

This is the largest overnight cut to social security since the second world war, affecting more than one in five households in some regions.

The kicker to working people on low incomes – 37% of those on universal credit – is that the government are to increase both employer and employee national insurance contributions (NICs) by 1.25% from April 2022 to pay for social care.

This is effectively a 2.5% tax increase as the incidence of employer contributions are likely to be passed on to employees in the form of lower wages (or reduced wage increases) in the long run.

Those affected by both will lose out by £1,290 on average, even before the likely effects of employer NICs on take home pay. The combined effect of these policies impact the poorest households the most.

Therefore have the Council undertaken any research as to how many households will be affected by these changes within the New Forest?

Answer:

Poverty within the country and within this District is a very real issue and we could ask if, in the 21st century, this is acceptable.

The question is ‘how much money should be taken from a person who has worked for it, to be given to someone who has not worked?’.

Within Cllr Clark’s question is the answer, in the fact you have raised the issue of increased taxation, as well as a removal of what was a temporary increase to the benefit service. It was clearly made as such and it is not a cut, it is a return to what was previously set out.

Our Prime Minister has got this one right. We must not allow business to rely on cheap labour from abroad and we need to enhance and support employment within this country and that is the way forward – strive for greater employment, upskill and value of workforces, value employees and pay them accordingly. The effect of this is less people on benefits, higher income from taxation. As a result we can be in a better place to support those in need within our society.

In the short term, 6,750 households in the District receive universal credit of which just under 50% are working. We will continue to support them, signposting them to other agencies and to charities within the District. We will look to deliver our share of the £500m household support fund that the Government recently announced, the money being made available to councils according to the Government website this month.

We will continue to support those most in need but we do have to do this in a cost effective way and ensure that it is affordable to all.

Question 3

From Cllr Philip Dowd to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness Services, Cllr Jill Cleary

Around 10% of British homes are in the C band or better for energy efficiency performance. It costs around £270 a year more to run a D band home and another £650 more to run an E band home. These figures predate the current price rises. People living in poor housing in fuel poverty are more likely to need NHS services and GP appointments to treat cold and damp related conditions.

You have a plan for new build. What is your vision for tackling private rental and privately owned properties in the New Forest district?

Answer:

Members will be aware of this Council's commitment to the private housing sector in our District with the publication of our Private Sector Housing Strategy in 2020, which included a specific priority on Energy Efficiency. This priority set out actions to improve access to energy efficiency advice and funding for landlords, renters and homeowners, whilst our private sector housing team ensure the Minimum Energy Efficiency standards are maintained during their everyday housing standards work.

Members of the Greener Housing Task & Finish Group will also be familiar with our forthcoming draft Greener Housing Strategy which builds further on the initiatives and activities contained within the Private Sector Housing Strategy.

We have also recently joined a number of consortia involving other local authorities to help deliver improved energy efficiencies to our private sector.

The first is a partnership with Portsmouth City Council, and other local authority districts in Hampshire and Sussex, to formulate a joint bid to request £32m from Central Government funding rounds. If successful, this will provide up to 2,660 households across the region, with access to funding to increase the energy performance of private homes.

The second is a partnership with Hampshire County Council and other local authority districts in Hampshire to take part in further investigatory work to identify target areas in Hampshire where our joint resources could be better directed to promote and link up with funding schemes for the benefit of the private sector.

This work will also complement the findings of our Private Sector Housing Survey and a recently commissioned project, in partnership with New Forest Citizens Advice, Southampton University, local foodbanks and voluntary support services, to establish the prevalence of fuel and food poverty in our district. This project has just delivered its findings and officers are beginning to analyse this data in order to establish targeted actions to help address the issues.

And finally, our very first Landlord Forum has just been scheduled for the 18th of November. Through regular forum meetings and engagement, we aim to inform landlords of greener housing funding schemes, ways to make properties more energy efficient and to improve standards generally for tenants.

Members, I am sure that our strategic actions, coupled with our Council wide commitment to greener initiatives, will provide significant benefits to our residents in the coming years and of course, to our environment.

Question 4

From Cllr Malcolm Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Partnering and Wellbeing, Cllr Mark Steele

How many criminal convictions have resulted from or included evidence from NFDC's CCTV cameras in the last 12 months?

Answer:

Public space cameras operate in 7 towns and villages across the district providing an active deterrence to crime and disorder, supporting this Council's objective of ensuring the New Forest is a safe place to live, work and visit.

Over the last 12 months, the service has actively pursued 722 live incidents consisting of burglaries, assaults, criminal damage, anti-social behaviour and the locating of missing or vulnerable people.

In addition, the service reviews hundreds of hours of CCTV footage which may be used in criminal or civil proceedings. Once the transfer of footage to the Police is completed, the constabulary become the data owner. Prosecutions can take many months, if not longer, to complete.

The CCTV Service is not privy to the number of prosecutions pursued by the Police as a result of the CCTV data. However, despite social restrictions and lockdowns in place during the pandemic, 108 evidence packages, consisting of many hours of footage, were supplied to the Police and the Crown Prosecution Service for the use in criminal investigations over the last year.

As Portfolio Holder for the CCTV Service, I am very proud that despite the impact of Covid 19 on services, our dedicated CCTV operatives continued to deliver a 24 hour service providing protection and support for both our residents and the Police.

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

Question 5

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

Can the portfolio holder advise what further action is being taken to mitigate any further impact on residents, following green bag and bottle collection delays? And have we seen any engagement from the recent push for HGV drivers?

Answer:

Thank you for your question. You will already have heard Cllr Heron's statement about waste collection services.

I can only repeat a large part of that statement that "We will keep working towards the most effective waste collection service for our community with the resources we currently have available to us". Our recruitment of HGV drivers will continue and we will review our current service arrangement at the Cabinet meeting on 3 November 2021.

I am particularly pleased to report that we have 7 applicants from within NFDC who have put their names forward for HGV driver training. I am sure that you will agree that this is a welcome opportunity for career progression with NFDC.

Note – in response to a supplementary question relating to the gritting of roads in the Winter months, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that this was a function delivered by Hampshire County Council.

Question 6

From Cllr Hilary Brand to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Edward Heron

Does the Leader agree that Council business through virtual meetings during the pandemic, proved to be of a benefit to Officers and Cllrs? And does he believe that pushing for hybrid meetings would engage the wider community more? And does he accept that this will help our wider strategy for reducing the Council's footprint?

Answer:

The use of virtual meetings during the pandemic was not only vital to allow Local Government and Government itself to continue, but I certainly think that it led to a new level of engagement from those who perhaps wouldn't ever have thought of watching a Council meeting before, some for the right reasons, some for the wrong reasons and I think we all remember a certain Parish Council.

Whilst I do think it was of great benefit to councillors and officers, I also think something was lost in that way of working. There is an atmosphere and a way that one works in a meeting like this that could never be replicated on Microsoft Teams.

How we worked during the lockdowns is not the way we should work in the future, but how we worked before the lockdowns is not how we should work in the future. There has to be a way that we can find to maximise those benefits for engagement, to the environment, to people's lives and work life balance. But equally, we get back the atmosphere and the debate that we have in a meeting such as this.

This Council did respond to a consultation some time ago asking Government to have greater flexibility. As Members know, we are constrained by law as to what meetings we can have virtually. We did respond highlighting we would like to have the option of choosing virtual or hybrid meetings and I certainly think that should we have that option it would allow us to have our own debate as to where that balance lies between convenience, the environment and the ability to have these face-to-face and atmospheric debates and meetings.