

FULL COUNCIL – 11 APRIL 2022 – QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDERS UNDER STANDING ORDER 22A

First Questions

Question 1

From Cllr Andrew Gossage to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Edward Heron

In light of the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, some entering Ukraine from Belarus, can the Portfolio Holder advise if this Council has any financial arrangement with any Russian or Belarusian company?

Answer:

The Council made a recent payment to Gazprom as a result of taking on a property that had them as their incumbent supplier. The process of switching this to our contract has now been completed, and Gazprom has been suspended as a supplier within our finance system.

Our utility contract is through Laser, a large local government framework and they've already confirmed with us that no Gazprom gas is supplied to NFDC.

In investment terms, we have no direct investments with exposure to Russian and Belarusian assets. Indirect exposure relates to BP, and BP have announced that they will be exiting this shareholding.

Question 2

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

The Government is reforming the Electric Vehicle Homecharge Scheme (EVHS) to speed up the provision of charge points in flats and rental accommodation.

From the 1 April 2022, local authorities that own social housing will be able to apply to the EV charge point grant for landlords. This will provide grants of up to £350 towards the cost of purchasing and installing a charge point, with up to 200 grants a year available for each local authority.

Can the Portfolio Holder outline their progress with this so far and the ongoing strategy especially for residents in flats and social housing with limited access to private parking?

Answer:

Councillor Brand may be aware that a Greener Housing Strategy is presently being developed in which an action will explicitly focus on options for the future provision of Electric Vehicle Charging Points for our existing tenants. Needless to say any scope to benefit from the Homecharge scheme will form an integral part of the plans that come forward.

However in terms of homes we are building it can be confirmed that our two schemes under construction at Hythe and New Milton are going to include electric vehicle charging points and the costs are to be part-funded through the OZEV grant scheme for landlords.

Going forward every available opportunity will be taken for our new-build developments to benefit from this initiative; thereby helping to offset the additional cost of providing a charging point for every new dwelling (with a parking space), as Building Regulations will require from June of this year.

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

Question 3

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

In the corporate plan the priority for your portfolio is, and I quote “Putting residents at the centre of what we do and how we do it.” Therefore, taking that point following the huge numbers of complaints in 2020 to 2021 in Housing, tenant relations and other areas please describe what review process you have taken and what change actions came out of that process is to address this increase?

Answer:

Cllr Osborne may recall the response to a similar question that I gave last summer when I explained that during the height of the pandemic - with national lockdowns, the closure of schools, homeworking and the stay at home rule, it is reasonable to say that many within our communities found the situation extremely challenging. This led to increased tensions, including a strain on a number of neighbourhood relations. The Council's Tenancy Management Team worked extremely hard to help deal with these tensions whilst maintaining services, both community based and at Appletree Court.

A review of the Housing Estates structure was undertaken in December 2021. This led to the creation of 3 new dedicated posts to enable a greater presence in and around our Estates to give support and proactive help to our tenants, as well as dealing with any issues head on - to prevent the escalation of issues. The new postholders will be able to devote the time that is required, especially when working with vulnerable tenants, to ensure their needs are met.

Members, I am delighted that we are putting in these extra resources which will make a real difference to the lives of our tenants and the neighbourhoods in which they live.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on Council houses, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that she would look into the matter and respond in writing.

Question 4

From Cllr Caroline Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for People and Places, Cllr David Russell

There is an increasing reliance by NFDC on voluntary and community organisations to take on vital services for residents such as food banks and debt advice. As these become increasingly important services because of the rising cost of living crisis mounts, I wonder what reassurance we have that the wages and support costs of these organisations will be met, to ensure that they can continue to function as they become even more vital service providers.

Answer:

Thank you Cllr Rackham for your question and the concerns you raise.

Throughout the pandemic we worked closely with organisations, including foodbanks where as a partnership we implemented the Food Larder project which supports our most vulnerable residents. We continue to work closely with local groups and partners to explore further options and initiatives to support our communities.

Over the last year NFDC have funded a number of organisations through our grant processes. In fact we have assisted to the value exceeding £158,500 this year alone. Tonight we considered the report from Cabinet that we support Citizen Advice New Forest. We are also providing additional funding for two years to support their debt advice service with the specific benefits of wider training for volunteers that the targeted support would provide. That amount of £35,000 was agreed.

Recently we have taken out the Citizen Advice New Forest from seeking annual grants. As part of the recent budget setting process, the Council committed to a 3 year Funding Agreement with Citizens Advice New Forest, and agreed to increase the value of the funding annually over the 3 year period.

This Conservative run Council does not micro manage other organisations.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the recent loss of a community organisation, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that he would refer the suggestion of ringfenced funding to Cabinet colleagues.

Question 5

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

I refer to the “Special, Planning Committee Meeting” held on Monday 27 July 2020.

Members were considering a proposed outline major re-development application, submitted by Fawley Waterside Ltd number: 19/10581 for 1,380 new homes on the site of former Fawley Power Station.

The decision was taken (as stated in the confirmed minutes) to: “Delegated Authority be given to the Chief Planning Officer to grant permission subject to:” 4 separate matters to be agreed and completed. Currently, this Local Planning Authority no longer has an appointed “Chief Planning Officer”.

Will the Portfolio Holder please explain to me in detail, the reasons why after 21 months, this Council has not agreed and completed with the applicant, the “Section 106 Agreement”, referred to by the Case Officer in the latest “Extension of Time Agreement” dated 28 March 2022. Therefore, the status of this application still indicates “Awaiting decision” and NO DECISION NOTICE has been issued. Why the delay? Is this our version of Jarndyce vs Jarndyce?

Answer:

For those who don't know, Cllr Clark refers to the case of Jarndyce V Jarndyce from a book by Charles Dickens, called Bleak House. The legal case (an inheritance) dragged on for so many generations that at the end of the book the characters were left with nothing. I do not see how Fawley Waterside S106 can be compared with that.

This is one of the most significant planning applications ever to be submitted to the Council. The corresponding S106 agreement is a substantial document involving 2 Planning Authorities (NFDC and NPA), Hampshire County Council, and the Authorities' respective solicitors, as well as a large number of landowners and their solicitors. The agreement involves numerous planning obligations many of which have needed significant negotiation before being agreed. It is not unusual for very large s106 agreements to take time to complete. Significant work is on-going to complete the agreement as soon as possible. An extension of time to 29 April 2022 which is well under two years, has been agreed with the

applicant. The Executive Head of Planning, Regeneration and Economy is also the Council's designated Chief Planning Officer who will be issuing the planning permission on completion of the s106 agreement.

Any time you have any further questions, the planning department is open to all councillors and officers will be happy to answer any questions.

Note – in response to a supplementary question requesting a regular briefing on Fawley Waterside, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that whenever updates were available to report, briefings were arranged.

Question 6

From Cllr Jack Davies to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Regeneration and Infrastructure, Cllr Diane Andrews

The New Forest is ancient and beautiful, and, for as long as we've had a council, it has been New Forest Councillors who have decided planning matters. Can the Portfolio Holder please reassure me that the establishment of any combined authority as part of a wider pan-Hampshire deal will keep planning decisions within the New Forest?

Answer:

This Council is keen to ensure that all opportunities of a devolution deal are explored when we are active in discussions with other Councils across Hampshire. I can however reassure Cllr Davies that there are no proposals to change the current planning system nor the sovereignty of our Council.

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

Question 7

From Cllr Mahmoud Kangarani to the Portfolio Holder for People and Places, Cllr David Russell

What is the NFDC current litter bin and street sweeping strategy? In Totton, two centre bins have gone missing since around middle of last year and not been replaced. Does this mean Totton residents have become the best in the Forest for not leaving litter?

Answer:

As you will know we have a Task and Finish Group who are working on a Litter Strategy which will include street sweeping, the group have met a number of times including site visits, we hope to bring the strategy to Panel in September.

Although you haven't attended any meetings of the Task and Finish Group I did spend 2 ½ hours with you on the 31st March 2022.

We understand that there may have been one bin removed by HCC during works, we are investigating this with HCC

Your question; Does this mean Totton residents have become the best in the Forest for not leaving litter? I would hope so, so let's say yes.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on road sweeping, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that the Council continued to investigate with Hampshire County Council on the removal of a bin.

Question 8

From Cllr Malcolm Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Business, Tourism and High Streets, Cllr Michael Harris

Given the extensive promised job creation in the proposed Freeport, 20,000 and rising according to Conservative members of this administration, which will in effect create local wage inflation, staff retention issues and competitive disadvantage for existing industries and businesses in the New Forest. What mitigation strategy might the NFDC be considering putting in place to assist our local existing businesses overcome these issues?

Answer:

Thank you, Councillor Wade, for your question. I was pleased to receive it and have enjoyed considering my reply. Because it wonderfully illustrates the difference between us – between you and me. For you Malcolm and the Liberal Democrats scattered around you, your glass is always half empty. But for me and my Conservative colleagues our glass is always half full.

The Freeport is a 25 year initiative. It will be supported by a significant programme of initiatives to ensure that there is a trained labour force to meet the needs of businesses that locate to the tax sites. Some of them may go on to create employment within our existing businesses or new businesses that may come to areas outside the Freeport. Development at both Marchwood and Fawley will be incremental over the coming years and therefore the scenario that you are suggesting - that the 20,000 jobs are immediate – is not correct. The impact that you therefore suggest will also not happen. As a Council we will ensure that our residents can access opportunities while supporting the growth of our existing businesses. I am certain that many of our existing businesses will benefit from the Freeport rather than be negatively impacted as you suggest. This is a wonderful opportunity to help raise the profile and economic success of the entire New Forest.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on mitigation on the Dibden Bay site, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that residents would be supported across the New Forest and welcomed any specific concerns to be addressed to him directly.

Second Questions

Question 9

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

We desperately need more affordable homes and social housing for young people. Whilst we appreciate the proposed housing on the Hythe hospital site what other actions are being taken to utilise other sites such as the Hythe police station site for this?

Answer:

As Portfolio Holder for Housing, I am very much aware of the efforts being made by our officers to identify and bring forward land and sites to build new homes and to meet our target for 600 additional council-owned homes by April 2026.

Over the last four years we have made significant in-roads towards the target and we have a firm pipeline in place. The search to find new sites and create new opportunities continues. The scope includes, but is not limited to, optimising land or buildings we own, land that is

owned by other public bodies, and openings to purchase land on the market or homes that are being built by private developers.

Indeed this diversity is evident through our current programme. We are currently building 12 new homes on two redeveloped council owned sites; we have recently agreed to purchase Hythe Medical Centre from the NHS at market value; we are taking forward plans to redevelop a property purchased from Hampshire County Council, and we are close to starting work on 28 homes from land that was purchased on the market through competitive tender.

There may be opportunities that Councillors are aware of that the Development Team might not be aware of, so if any Members have suggestions or knowledge about new openings then please let me or the Development Team know what and where they are, and they will be investigated.

In closing, Councillor Osborne may be interested to know that the Housing Development Team first enquired about the future of Hythe Police Station in November 2020 and some initial meetings were held with the HPCC's office in early 2021. A number of efforts have since been made by Officers to move the dialogue forward, culminating in a direct letter to the Commissioner herself last month requesting that progress be made.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on housing for key workers, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that she would look into the matter and respond in writing.