

**FULL COUNCIL – 10 OCTOBER 2022 – QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDERS
UNDER STANDING ORDER 22A**

First Questions

Question 1

From Cllr David Harrison to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Investment and Corporate Services, Cllr Jeremy Heron

The cost of living crisis, particularly the huge increase in energy bills, represents a very serious threat to many people on low incomes living in the New Forest District. Please will you outline and publish a full list of help that is available via the District Council and through our partners?

Answer:

We have a dedicated webpage - <https://newforest.gov.uk/costofliving> that we have shared with our partners that gives lots of advice and information on a variety of topics and support available to households, from energy bills and food to support for families. This is continually evolving and these pages are regularly reviewed and updated.

A pocket sized guide on the support available locally and nationally has been widely distributed throughout the district.

Council staff are providing advice, information and signposting when speaking to residents and we are including information in our communications with our residents, to ensure those who do not visit the Council's website can also be reached.

Question 2

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

Would the Portfolio Holder consider implementing a "Community Skips" scheme to reduce fly-tipping, like the scheme currently being operated by Gosport Borough Council?

Answer:

The scheme that is being proposed by Gosport Borough Council has been reviewed by our officers. Having taken feedback, I am not convinced that at the present time this is the most effective way of reducing fly-tipping. This Council provides regular waste collections from the kerbside and offers a chargeable bulky waste service. In addition, within our District there are three Household waste recycling centres provided by HCC which accept a wide range of household waste items, for recycling or disposal. I also have a concern about a community skip scheme not fulfilling our commitment to the waste hierarchy and reducing levels of waste and encouraging reuse.

We shall of course monitor the outcome of this scheme in Gosport to see what can be learned from it.

Question 3

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

The housing crisis is worse than it has ever been in the New Forest. Young people growing up in the New Forest, whose families have lived here for hundreds of years, are being forced

to move away. This is a situation made much worse by Right to Buy which reduces our supply of social housing and widens the gap between those who own their own home and those who rent. Will the Portfolio Holder write to the new Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities asking them to scrap the previous Prime Minister's plan to extend this damaging policy to Housing Associations?

Answer:

Members, never before has this Council done more, to create more affordable homes for the residents of this District. Members will be very aware of the hard work we have done over a number of years to create our own supply of new council homes through our Housing Development Programme, and in supporting our partner housing providers in producing their new homes. In doing so, we have been acutely aware of the need to create a range of housing options - new rented properties at both social and affordable rents, more temporary accommodation for those who present as homeless until they secure more settled accommodation, shared ownership properties which gives people a chance to partly rent and partly buy their home and staircase up to full ownership in the future. Even through our residential investment company, we have an excellent rented housing product for those that can afford to pay more towards their rent. Members we wish to cater for the whole of our community and that is what we are doing.

Whilst views differ on the RTB model, the reality is that it has provided home ownership to a great many people who might otherwise, never have got on the property ladder. It has its place and this Council will not seek to dissuade those who desire to own their own home. On that basis, I do not intend writing to the Secretary of State, as Cllr Brand has requested.

We will continue to provide a range of housing options for people within our community and do all that we can to support all our generations, to live happy and prosperous lives.

Question 4

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

Charity shops perform a significant role in our communities and for the charities themselves, without which many deserving causes would be unfunded. However they do not run themselves, charity shop volunteers are absolutely necessary in order that Charity shops may function. They are unpaid and many are pensioners on low income, who give their time freely to help the charity shop.

As these shops are in our towns and villages and charities cannot function without their volunteers and need every penny raised in order to be able to fulfil their obligations and commitments to the local residents.

Therefore in this time of a cost of living crisis would the council provide a free parking pass for charity shop workers, so they are not charged to park, whilst they are working in the shops for nothing?

Answer:

We all appreciate the excellent work and the role of charity shops throughout the district. At this time there are no plans to allow free parking for charity shop workers any other shop worker. It is important that our off-street car parks continue to provide parking in support of all local businesses and to this end our parking clock scheme provides excellent value for money for parking in the town and village car parks.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on operating practices to support residents, the Portfolio Holder highlighted there would be no increase to car parking charges for the next year as an immediate and practical step to support for local people.

Question 5

From Cllr Mark Clark to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Edward Heron

I am aware from colleagues in Scotland various warm banks are now open in kirks and other buildings across the Highlands and Islands. As the cooler weather arrives, Councils elsewhere have also been looking to identify places where residents unable to keep up with the cost of energy will be invited to spend the day to keep warm. This is out with the partnership with Citizens Advice already identified to Councillors.

What plans have this Council to follow likewise and what measure of emergency funding or partnership arrangements have been put in place for activating these 'cosy spaces' (as named by Dundee Council). Can the Leader provide some estimated costs for this?

Answer:

We continue to work with partners both directly and through the Cost of Living Steering Group. Information on the support we are offering, along with signposting to that being offered by our partners, can be found on the Council's website and the information is being made available to those who contact us, or partners such as the CAB, through other means such as in-person or by telephone.

Specifically in regards to Warm Spaces, the County Council are making their Libraries available and more information can be found about the support they are offering with staying warm either by visiting their website or calling the 'Hitting the Cold Spots' helpline on 0800 804 8601.

In addition to the support being offered by the County Council we are aware of a number of Town & Parish Councils, Village Halls and Community Groups that are developing plans for further support with staying warm, often targeted and smaller community groups or those with specific needs. The Council will be providing a grant fund to support these initiatives and details on how groups may apply will shortly be published on our website.

We are also developing and piloting community hubs at six of our Food Larders to provide outreach support, giving advice and information and a place for a hot drink and biscuit as part of a wider long term strategy.

Various organisations, including officers from our own Housing Teams, will be attending these hubs to provide advice and information on a range of issues. We are also in discussions with local groups and partners, including Hampshire County Council and local faith groups, on the provision of warm spaces, and we will promote and signpost residents to these.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the cost of living page on the Council's website, the Leader confirmed he would ask Communications to ensure the signposting was in place to external support. He also asked councillors to continue to flag issues as they arise.

Question 6

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

I wonder if the portfolio holder can supply income figures for parking in Totton Town centre and explain how these compare with targets?

Answer:

The ticket sales (coin, card and pay by phone) income for the Totton car parks for 2021/22 financial year is in addition, a pro rata parking clock allocation has been added which gives total income per car park.

Eling cemetery CP – Free

Civic centre CP – £10,204 ticket sales/£21,920 Parking clocks = £32,124

Elingfield CP – £5,978 ticket sales/£21,920 Parking clocks = £27,898

Rumbridge Street CP – £11,463 ticket sales/£36,168 Parking clocks = £47,631 (an additional sum of £11,000 was received from a local private business who rented half of the car park for a 3 month period Dec to Feb.)

Westfield Road CP – £16,426 ticket sales/£35,100 Parking clocks = £51,526

Winsor Road CP – £22,065 ticket sales/£20,880 Parking clocks = £42,945.

There are no set targets for income for any car park including Totton.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on reducing car parking charges, the Portfolio Holder highlighted with inflation that freezing charges should assist.

Question 7

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

For many months now, the people of Pennington have been subject to multiple missed residual waste collections, delays to glass and green waste collections, and cancelled bulky household waste collections. It simply isn't good enough. Does the portfolio holder agree with me that the money this Council plans to give to Freedom Leisure would be better spent on fixing the crisis in our bin collection service?

Answer:

In answer to your question, you shouldn't be surprised to learn that I do not agree with you.

But permit me to respond to your comments.

In late July and early August, the council saw disruption to kerbside collections of glass and garden waste, as weekly refuse and recycling collections were prioritised resulting from staffing problems. At the end of August, we did see some minor service disruption as glass crews completed the catch-up from the missed collection 4 weeks prior, with large amounts presented for collection.

Unfortunately, the service had been impacted across the district - and not just Pennington.

I am pleased to say that recruitment and retention has improved significantly since July and besides being a little behind on bag delivery all services are operating as normal.

It would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to thank the waste collection teams for their support and flexibility during the challenging times and I mustn't forget the depot supervisors who took to the wheel again in addition to doing their own work. It's not an easy job rescheduling and reorganising teams at short notice while picking up extra work.

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

Second Questions

Question 8

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

Can the Finance Portfolio lead please list out any loans made by this Council to any other Council in the last five years and how much those amounts are and whether they have yet to be repaid?

Answer:

As part of the Council's adopted Treasury Management Strategy which ensures the Council's cash is suitably spread and invested according to agreed thresholds and limits, the Council is not a stranger to the issuing of loans to other Local Authorities. So as not to create too much work for our busy finance team, I have asked for information covering the period between now and the 1st April 2021. I am able to confirm that we have lent to 4 authorities in that period, with 1 of those loans yet to mature.

Whilst I wouldn't wish to individually name the Local Authorities who have borrowed from this Council, I can confirm that each and every loan issued by this Council, including transactions prior to April 2021, have been repaid in line with the originally agreed terms, and importantly, with the relevant accrued interest paid.

Question 9

From Cllr Caroline Rackham to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Edward Heron

The additional work as part of the mapped free port will be much further towards the estuary of the Test than the current docks and will almost certainly contribute to additional flooding for parts of Totton and Eling. Could the Leader of the Council please consider using some of any revenue from the forthcoming free port to build additional flood defences, including a flood barrier?

Answer:

All proposals for development on any freeport site have to go through the normal planning process and of the four tax sites, two of the sites have recently been the subject of planning applications. Where there is any element of risk of flooding either on the site or adjacent land, applicants are required to submit flood risk assessments including hydromorphic reports where appropriate. If there is any change developers must take measures to ensure mitigation is in place.

I would not want to see Freeport money spent to take measures that developers or site owners should be undertaking as part of their planning applications.

There is an established process through the Freeport including the Local Investment Pool if suggested measures are not directly related to development. However, if directly related to development, developers or land owners should undertake the requirements of the local planning process in the normal way.

Note – in response to a supplementary question, the Leader reiterated that the Freeport was not an opportunity for developers to use local authority or Freeport funds to address requirements that should be satisfied as part of their planning application.

Third Questions

Question 10

From Caroline Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Regeneration and Infrastructure, Cllr Diane Andrews

Apart from a bus war that is happening in the North of the town, Totton is very poorly served by public transport and its being cut back even further. Residents frequently tell me that they find it easier to catch a bus to Hythe than their own town centre and can't work in Lyndhurst or other New Forest towns because of the lack of transport. What is the intention of the Council to help solve this conundrum?

Answer:

It is acknowledged that like many Districts there are limited bus services within certain areas of the District. As a district council we have no direct control over the way bus companies operate within the District. We work closely with the County Council, as the highway authority, to encourage and support the use of public transport.

As part of new developments the Council require developers to work with bus operators to increase stops, change routes to pick up from new development and to increase the number of services. This is also underpinned with a Travel Plan putting in place measures to encourage sustainable transport, that is monitored by the Highway Authority.

I think you will agree that the District Council is doing all within its powers to improve bus services within the district given how limited our powers are.

Of interest, the community grants scheme is now open for local initiatives that include transport.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on community buses, the Portfolio Holder reiterated that the Council could support local initiatives, such as community buses, through the use of the Community Grants process, due to start soon for the 2023/24 budget setting process.