

**FULL COUNCIL – 14 NOVEMBER 2022 – QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDERS
UNDER STANDING ORDER 22A**

First Questions

Question 1

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

Why has the District Council started adopting the description of "Strategic Land Reserve" (a term introduced by Associated British Ports) for land that has always been known as Dibden Bay to this Council and local residents?

Answer:

ABP in the Port of Southampton Port Master Plan, 2016 - 2035 at page 9 states:-

"A strategic Land Reserve known locally as Dibden Bay totalling approximately 800 acres or 325 hectares held for future port expansion."

The Council, in the adopted Local Plan, has referred to the land identified within the Local Plan at page 77 as Dibden Bay. ABP have described the land as the Strategic Land Reserve, and this is how the land has been described in the Solent Freeport, led by ABP as the landowners. The description or name of the site are used interchangeably. For ease of reference and consistency the Council has been referring to the land as the Strategic Land Reserve in recent discussions about the Freeport as that is the description that the landowners have given to the land area.

Question 2

From Cllr Philip Dowd to the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Regeneration and Infrastructure, Cllr Diane Andrews

It is expected that the Freeport will generate thousands of new skilled jobs. Taking into account the low unemployment and lack of relevant skills in the New Forest District, where do you see housing being built for these workers? The Waterside communities are sandwiched between the National Park and Southampton Water and the Local Plan does not take into account all of the labour requirements of the Freeport such as those of the ABP at Dibden Bay.

Answer:

Whilst the New Forest is the 4th largest economy in Hampshire, our economy has experienced above average impact from the pandemic. The Freeport will help address this impact together with bringing new employment into an area that has experienced lower than average levels of new employment growth.

Having an up-to-date Local Plan in place means that we have already planned for additional homes to accommodate employment growth at both the Fawley and Marchwood/Solent Gateway employment sites that are designated as Freeport tax sites.

As you have identified the Adopted Local Plan does not take account of the impact of a Port expansion at Dibden Bay because this is not a scheme that has been taken through any planning process. The Adopted Local Plan acknowledges that in the event that ABP gain consent for port use at Dibden Bay, the Council will initiate a review of the Local Plan in whole or in part to address the implications of major port expansion.

It is important that we are mindful of the time that it would take should ABP seek consent for port expansion onto Dibden Bay. A future application for port use at Dibden Bay would be likely to be of a scale that would qualify as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) under the 2008 Planning Act and thereby require an application to be submitted for a Development Consent Order. It would fall to the Planning Inspectorate rather than the District Council to consider a NSIP for port development and to make a recommendation to the Secretary of State whether a Development Consent Order should be made. This process in itself is likely to take 2 – 3 years before a decision would be made.

The National Planning Policy Framework requires that reviews should be completed no later than five years from the adoption date of a plan, and should take into account changing circumstances affecting the area, or any relevant changes in national policy. Relevant strategic policies will need updating at least once every five years if their applicable local housing need figure has changed significantly; and they are likely to require an earlier review if local housing need is expected to change significantly in the near future.

This Council will continue to plan positively with succinct and up-to-date plans that provide a positive vision for the future of each area; address housing needs and other economic, social and environmental priorities; providing a platform for local people to shape their surroundings.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on transport infrastructure, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that she would be happy to provide further details outside of the meeting.

Question 3

From Cllr Alex Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Partnering and Wellbeing, Cllr Geoff Blunden

As you are a keen cyclist yourself, as seen on the cover of the well-being strategy, you will want to see local residents using their bikes to access the five Leisure Centres in the New Forest.

However, there have been reports of bikes being stolen from outside local Centres, with Applemore in my ward being targeted in particular.

With no visibility from reception, and some Managers not trained to use the CCTV I have been told, can you advise what precautions Freedom are taking to ensure Cycle security and what you are doing to ensure Freedom takes this responsibility seriously?

Answer:

Following any allegation of theft, Freedom Leisure work alongside Hampshire Constabulary and provide them with any evidential footage they have from the centres closed circuit CCTV system. There is CCTV in place which covers the bike storage racks at all of the leisure centres.

Officers within the Community Safety Team, alongside the Leisure Contracts Manager are supporting Freedom Leisure to highlight any environmental improvements that can be made to reduce further incidents. Freedom Leisure are also considering improvements and enhancements to CCTV as part of their ongoing capital investment programme.

With Freedom Leisure's implementation of Green Travel Plans at centres, they will be installing new bike storage areas in locations covered by the CCTV systems. Local PCSOs will also be supporting awareness raising about the importance of securing bicycles when left unattended. Additional arrangements are being finalised by the community safety team

who will be providing free bike marking which is registered on the national register to identify and return bicycles that have been stolen.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on bike cages and information sharing, the Portfolio Holder was not aware of any proposed bike cages at this stage. However, a range of measures would be considered where necessary. Regarding information sharing for the storage of bikes, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the responsibility and onus also on bike owners to ensure their bike was correctly secured.

Question 4

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

With high streets struggling due to cost of living and energy crisis, and some traders having to make difficult decisions and possibly cease trading, what action is the Portfolio Holder going to consider to support our village and towns through this very challenging time?

Answer:

The Council through its Economic Development Team are running a number of initiatives that will support our high streets. In the New Year, 80 high street businesses across 5 New Forest towns and villages will be able to benefit from the New Forest Shop Doctor programme. As with the successful 2022 Shop Doctor programme, this will provide participating businesses with impartial feedback, raise standards and improve the customer experience and foot-fall in town and village centres.

High Street businesses will be able to participate in the New Forest Business Boost Programme in the New Year. This is a bespoke programme to support business resilience and growth. The New Forest Business Boost Programme is being delivered by New Forest District Council and University of Portsmouth Business School. The programme is fully funded so there is no cost to businesses from this support.

The Council has also set up a 'Cost of living' task group and through their extensive business communication activities ensure that businesses are kept up to date with new sources of support and advice. There is also information for businesses with rising costs on a dedicated NFDC webpage.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on business support measures for the rising cost of utilities, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the support the Council provided was non-statutory and therefore within limited resources, as much as possible was being pursued to support businesses. However, the Government support was highlighted that had been put in place to support individuals and businesses throughout these rising costs. It was suggested that further reflection be given following the Autumn Budget Statement from the Government.

Question 5

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

Would the Portfolio Holder agree that the Bartley Water and the green spaces it flows through in Totton and Eling, should be given Site of Nature Conservation Status?

Answer:

Parts of Bartley Water are already designated as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation or SINC in shorthand. There are six designated sites within the area known.

I am sure you are aware that the Council does not have the power to designate SINC status on a site, SINC's form part of a wider national network of locally valued wildlife sites.

Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC) manages the Hampshire SINC system on behalf of the local planning authorities and follows national guidance on identification, selection and management of local sites. I do have more information regarding the criteria which I will email to you rather than discuss it here.

I understand that there is an area of land close to Bartley Water that is in the ownership of NFDC, and officers will be looking to Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre to survey and to understand whether there are any notable species of important habitat. I will ensure that you are kept informed about further survey works.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on pollution, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the importance of the SINC system in moving forward with local sites of local value, which in turn would provide safeguards against pollution.

Question 6

From Cllr Jack Davies to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Edward Heron

Many residents have contacted me to express concern about the new legislation forcing people to display ID in order to vote. I understand that local authorities are duty-bound to provide residents with free voter ID. Can the Leader tell me what progress has been made on providing free voter ID to residents before the local elections in May?

Answer:

Voter's wishing to cast their vote in a polling station will need to provide a suitable form of photographic identification for the May 2023 elections. The list of what is acceptable is fairly extensive however individual's without a suitable form of photographic identification will be able to apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate early in 2023. We are awaiting a go live date from DLUHC.

Individual's will be able make an application for a certificate through a government portal on the GOV.UK website or by paper to the local authority, and the elections team are currently working with DLUHC and our software supplier to implement the necessary arrangements to be able to accept and process these applications.

We have been informed that the Voter Authority Certificate will take the form of an A4 paper-based document, with inherent security features, displaying the name and photograph of the individual.

A temporary certificate can also be issued in circumstances where the individual has not received their Voter Authority Certificate.

The Electoral Commission will be launching a mass advertising campaign in January to raise awareness of these changes and our local communications plan will also ensure that key messages on the need to have voter ID, and how to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate are widely communicated using multiple channels.

Second Questions

Question 7

From Cllr Alex Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Partnering and Wellbeing, Cllr Geoff Blunden

It has been nearly 18 months since Freedom took over NFDC leisure centre management, do you think the current performance levels have justified this decision?

Answer:

Yes, Freedom's current performance levels justify the Council's decision to choose Freedom Leisure to oversee the management of the Council's five leisure centres.

Health & Fitness memberships have grown by 54% since the date of transfer, and numbers on the Learn to Swim programme have grown by 57%. Over 4,600 people now attend swimming lessons at our Leisure Centres each week, for 50 weeks of the year.

Freedom have provided a number of promotional offers to encourage residents to participate including Guest Passes, a Summer Introductory Membership offer and Group Fitness discounts and offers, such as the current 10 sessions for £35.

Freedom have appointed a Healthy Communities Manager to oversee the Active Lifestyles Programme which has received 378 referrals in the last 12 months and engages with 39 surgeries across the district. In addition, Freedom have launched a number of new activity programmes designed to engage with harder to reach areas of the community and plan to do more as we move forwards.

The £2.4m Capital investment Programme has seen the launch of the brand new four storey Applemore Play Zone, Elevate Fitness Studio and replacement Spin Bike programme. Works are ongoing on the new café areas at Applemore and Totton and the large refreshed play zone at Ringwood and changing room renovations at Totton are also both nearing completion.

Clearly I also recognise the significant challenges impacting Freedom Leisure with regards to the utilities crisis, and understand the difficult decisions that Freedom are making. I am aware that some users have disliked some of the measures taken to reduce the significant cost increases faced by Freedom, but it's right that we show our support to Freedom as they continue to work towards ensuring the financial viability and sustainability of the leisure centres.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on holding Freedom Leisure to account for recent concerns raised, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that all complaints were followed through and acted upon. Regarding the recent delays to building works, this was unfortunately common across all sectors and the programme would be completed shortly.