

FULL COUNCIL – 10 JULY 2023 – QUESTIONS UNDER STANDING ORDER 22

Question 1

From Cllr M Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing, Cllr Poole

In the minutes of the February 2023 Council meeting, the Leader of the Council committed to three hundred thousand pounds (£300,000) in 2023/24 of investment in enhanced Community Safety measures, further enhancing the feeling of safety within our various communities. Please can you give us detail on how that funding will be used?

Answer:

Thank you for the question. As Members will know from the Council's recent Insight Survey, 96% of our residents feel safe in their local areas. However, nearly a quarter of our residents have a fear of crime. This administration is prepared to tackle this fear of crime and have allocated a substantial figure of £300,000 to roll out an extension of the Council's CCTV public network cameras across the District.

The Council's CCTV network of cameras have proved to be an extremely effective tool against crime and disorder in our District. The camera network currently operates in seven towns and villages across the district providing an active deterrence to crime and disorder, ensuring the New Forest remains a safe place to live, work and visit. Just to give an example, last year our CCTV Service, actively tracked over 527 offences consisting of burglaries, assaults, criminal damage, anti-social behaviour and the locating of missing or vulnerable people. It has also served as a very visible deterrent to the potential commission of further incidents of crime and disorder.

We are about to begin a dialogue with our Town and Parish Council partners to roll out an extension of this effective tool against crime and disorder in our District. We will look to work with our local councils and Police colleagues to ensure that the cameras go in the right places to bring about even greater results to reassure our residents that the New Forest District is a safe place to live, work and visit.

As Portfolio Holder, I am very proud that we are continuing to deliver a 24/7, 365 days a year, CCTV service, providing protection and support for both our residents and the Police.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the number of prosecutions made using Council CCTV footage in the last two years, the Portfolio Holder confirmed he would look into this outside of the meeting.

Question 2

From Cllr Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Tipp

Before the recent election I was told that it would be left for the next administration to establish how Dibden Bay would be protected from development. Now that we're in the next administration could we please hear how the Council will protect Dibden bay from Development as it has become part of the free port designated area?

Answer:

First let me reassure you that sites inside the Freeport have exactly the same protection as the rest of our district. I can also assure you that this Conservative administration will do its

utmost to prevent any undesirable development from taking place anywhere in our district, including Dibden Bay. Any development would need planning permission from the District Council, or for major development, the Secretary of State. If a proposal were made we would consider its affect on the economy, the environment and on local communities and then respond. For further detailed information I recommend you study our Local Plan which has a specific policy on Dibden Bay, ECON04 (PP77 -79).

Note – in response to a supplementary question on research on the ecological impact on Dibden Bay, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the significant environmental research on Dibden Bay that has taken place over a number of years and any future proposals would be subject to further environmental considerations.

Question 3

From Cllr A Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden

I, like most Cllrs around the District have received a significant amount of feedback on the Council's 'No Mow May' and grass cutting policy. Much of it has been positive, and it has been encouraging to see wildflowers growing and promoting biodiversity throughout the area. However, clearly there are lessons to be learnt with the maintenance of specific areas such as near main roads and junctions. So, we can ensure our residents are understanding and support how approach, would you agree to a consultation with local Residents, Cllrs, and our fantastic Open Spaces Team on the policy, so next 'No Mow May' receives even more Community Support?

Answer:

Thank you for your question Councillor Wade, I am pleased to hear that most of the feedback you have received has been positive, that certainly reflects my experience also.

Members will I am sure agree that taking steps to address the climate and nature emergency is a very important issue for this whole Council, and we need to demonstrate positive action and civic leadership on this issue.

There is much that lies outside of our control and where we rely on partners to deliver, but where we can take steps to effect change for the benefit of nature and the environment, I believe we should do so – and that includes in our operations and in reviewing our historic approaches to mowing and streetscene.

“No Mow May” is a nationally recognised initiative and forms part of this Council’s approach to preserving biodiversity, following the declaration of a Climate and Nature Emergency. Perhaps the terminology “no mow” is not as helpful as it can be as it suggests we are not doing something – when in fact all we have done operationally is delay the timing of the first of the scheduled cuts to enable a more abundant habitat for pollinators at a key time of year.

Maybe next year we should rename the scheme “Let it Bee” as I am certain that a small amount of visual impact will have had massive benefits for insects, bees and other pollinators.

We have of course been recording all feedback received, and again I reiterate this has been absolutely in the majority positive. I think that was because the scheme was carefully planned, for example, in known locations where, for highway safety visibility reasons grass cutting needed to be maintained, this was carried out so that site lines at junctions were preserved. As part of our review, safety concerns raised about other specific locations have

been reviewed so that we are learning from our approach this year to make it even better next year.

This is part of a wider review of the scheme which will include meeting with stakeholders such as HCC in their position as Highways Authority.

Finally we will continue to work with our communications teams to ensure that we showcase the positive impacts that delaying the cutting of grassed areas can have, recognising that change and positive action for the climate and nature is not always recognised for what it is by all.

Notes – This question was dealt with by the Leader in the absence of the Portfolio Holder. In response to a supplementary question on the responsibility for different open spaces, the Leader would refer this to the Portfolio Holder for a response outside of the meeting.

Question 4

From Cllr J Davies to the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing, Cllr Poole

During the previous Council, I tried to get the Council to write up a deprivation action plan, like they have in other councils, but that was torpedoed by Conservative Councillors. With a new-look council, will "reducing poverty and deprivation" now be included as an objective in the upcoming corporate plan?

Answer:

Thank you for the question. This administration puts the most vulnerable in our communities, at the heart of everything it does. Our days' work is all about improving the lives of our communities, including helping the most vulnerable who are experiencing poverty and deprivation.

Let me tell you of some of the work that we are doing:-

We have been working hard on a significant number of initiatives with our local partners, including Citizens Advice and Fare Share to develop and support 11 food larders across the district to help households make their money go further. These food larders have been a great success and are invaluable to many in our communities. These are in addition to the existing food banks which are in place across the District, which we support. We have also developed 5 weekly community hubs where residents can get a hot drink and something to eat and also to meet with officers from our Benefits and Housing teams, as well as from Citizens Advice and other partners, who provide support, advice and information.

We have a well-established Health and Wellbeing Action Plan for our District, where we are facilitating the delivery of a great number of initiatives on the ground- ranging from warmer homes grants, tackling alcohol and drug related harm, promoting opportunities for the youth within our District through to improving our neighbourhoods, installing pride and place and establishing community cohesion.

Our Homelessness Team continues to develop local protocols and initiatives to promote health, housing and wellbeing in our communities. We have established multi-disciplinary health and housing teams which support vulnerable people holistically; we have co-written the Hampshire Care leavers protocol, established referral pathways between lead agencies to secure help quicker, supported a number of clients secure employment and counselling services to improve their situations and worked with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) to establish a panel to action support to the most vulnerable people in the Waterside area. In

Hythe we work in partnership with The Crossings to support vulnerable people, with a host of needs, in their locality.

To support households we have also proactively administered various government schemes, providing advice, supporting and signposting information to residents; we chair meetings with numerous organisations that provide a range of support to households across the district to share information and work together, and we actively promote the support available through social media, resident emails and by directly working with communities, such as attending the recent Hythe Community Champions event. We also are intending to regenerate St. Georges Hall, Calshot using Shared Prosperity Funding. This hall sits within an important community and it is important that we do all that we can to improve this much needed facility.

For our 5,200 council tenancies we have a dedicated support worker who is focussing on assisting tenants with downsizing to smaller and more affordable accommodation.

As you can see, we are doing a great deal to support our communities, especially the most vulnerable.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the Council showing civic leadership on deprivation, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that he was beginning talks with officers to initiate a forum with partners to discuss how the most vulnerable may continue to be supported and that no one in the District is left behind.

Question 5

From Cllr Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Tipp

This is a follow-up to my question submitted to the Council meeting held on 11 April 22, regarding the Planning Committee's decision to grant permission to re-develop the site of the former Fawley Power Station.

The application 19/10581 is for 1,380 new homes and employment. The status was then and still is today "Awaiting decision", and is still subject to a completed Section 106 agreement.

The Case Officer addressed the Planning Committee at their December 2022 meeting with an "Update", and a completed S106 was expected in January this year.

Will the Portfolio Holder explain in specific detail and the specific reasons why we still have no completed S106 agreement. It is now 3 years since determination and no decision notice has been issued. Surely, it is in the interest of this Council to be transparent, and also, it has to be in the public interest to know what is going on?

Answer:

Council Officers have worked closely with the applicants to produce a Section 106 agreement that will ensure the essential infrastructure, mitigation and contributions. A final draft is with the applicants for signing. On 28th June we have been told that they anticipate signing by the end of July 2023. Once this is completed, planning permission can then be issued. Should this not take place, Officers will give members of the Planning Committee a further update after the end of July.

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

Question 6

From Cllr Sleep to the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing, Cllr Poole

At the Cabinet meeting held on 7 June, Cllr M Wade referred to the Waterside as a 'cultural desert'. Does the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing agree with this statement? If not, can he please explain why?

Answer:

Thank you for your question. No, I do not. The Waterside is home to a wide range of creative people and creative activity. Whilst there is an identified lack of cultural infrastructure, such as arts venues and museums, there is certainly no lack of creative potential. Culture in Common, our three-year Arts Council England project, is working with Waterside communities to realise this potential through improved cultural investment and support. So far, Culture in Common has supported the Hythe Halloween events and the re-launch of the Waterside Arts Festival, amongst other work. It is important we take the time to understand what our local Waterside communities want and need for their towns and villages. Culture in Common has undergone a local cultural engagement analysis and continues to run community consultation and opportunities for co-creation. It is an exciting time for the Waterside with lots of potential being identified for future projects and at least two more years of continued Culture in Common funding for the Waterside area. Also, Folio, now widening their reach across the district, is engaging with many Waterside based creative professionals and providing networking and training opportunities to empower local creatives to engage with their local communities.

Second Questions

Question 7

From Cllr A Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness, Cllr S Davies

In the Annual Performance Report, it notes that we have currently completed 285 additional Council Homes, which is under half of the 600 homes target set for 2026. We are 3 years away, and only built 24 in 2021/22, are we in danger of missing this target? And as he is new to the role, are there any ideas or fresh approaches he is keen to explore in his new role?

Answer:

Thank you for the question.

I am sure Councillor Wade will recall that he asked a very similar question at Council in February in which he acknowledged the many unforeseen challenges we have faced....and continue to face.

Before I answer the question, I would like to be clear about where we are today.

As Councillor Wade correctly states, at the end of March this year the Council had provided an additional 285 council homes since April 2018.

This figure includes 75 Buy Backs; 64 S106 affordable homes and 67 homes built on Council owned land.

The remaining 79 homes have been delivered as a result of buying and converting buildings or creating homes from underutilised assets we already owned. And of these, 56 are now

providing Temporary Accommodation for single person households and families. This morning, I was delighted to see that NFDC are now inviting applications for shared-ownership homes in Burgate.

Turning to our current pipeline we have firm plans to deliver a further 144 additional affordable homes over the next three years including 60 more Buy Backs and Off-The-Shelf purchases, 14 more S106 homes, and 70 energy efficient new homes which are to be built on sites and land we have already acquired. That will take us to 429 homes, leaving a further 171 homes to meet the 600 target by April 2026.

Our Housing Development Team continues to pursue every potential opening through public bodies, private developers and that includes our own land. As Councillor Wade acknowledged in February, these are challenging times. However, I am confident that as we progress our plan we will continue to strike the right balance by delivering as many homes as we can, but I stress, always by acting prudently and spending wisely.

In the meantime, I remain immensely proud of our achievements over the last 5 years of the schemes that we have delivered already - and those that are in the pipeline.

Chairman – with your permission I will answer briefly Cllr Wade's 2nd question.

It would be slightly disingenuous of me to agree that I was "new to the role". As you know I have been actively involved in Housing since I joined the Council in 2007, first as a panellist and more recently as panel chairman.

So as you might expect, I do have some ideas to bring to the Council. But first they must be carefully thought through and costed and then shared with the Housing Panel.

The focus for now must be on delivering the plan to meet our target.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the appearance of these targets in the Annual Performance Report, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that he would consider the comments made by Cllr Wade.