

## FULL COUNCIL – 11 DECEMBER 2023 – QUESTIONS UNDER STANDING ORDER 22

### First Questions

#### Question 1

##### **From Cllr Parker to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Cleary**

I have been made aware of yet another sizeable sewage leak at a Southern Water run pumping station in the New Forest - this time at Flexford Lane, Sway.

I was delighted that the Leader shared my concerns about the sewage discharge near Lyndhurst in September and agreed that pollution of our rivers and land is unacceptable. She will recall that she committed in her statement of 11 September 2023 to this Council that “the District Council will do all it can to support [the Environment Agency]” and that the Council would “continue to work hard with our partners to protect and improve [the New Forest environment]”.

The Leader will recall that in 2021 Southern Water was fined £90m for deliberately dumping billions of litres of raw sewage into the Beaulieu River and other sites. Then, just last month, over 18,000 households in our District, including residents in my ward of Brockenhurst and Denny Lodge, had no water supply due to the shutdown of the Testwood Water Supply Works. Most recently I have had videos and photos shared with me of raw sewage running into a stream at Flexford Lane water Works in Sway, with toilet paper clinging to the verges.

The ongoing impact of these failings cannot continue to simply be accepted by this Council. Therefore will the Leader please detail all actions taken by the Council since her statement of the 11 September 2023 to support enforcement efforts and protect the New Forest environment? Will she also lay out her plans for the coming weeks and months to ensure that our residents have both the unique environment in which we all live and their water supply protected?

*Answer:*

*I was extremely concerned to hear of this incident and agree that it is unacceptable. Whilst it is the Environment Agency that has lead responsibility for investigating the pollution incidents you have highlighted and for taking enforcement action to tackle serious pollution of controlled waters, Council officers will continue to work closely with the Environment Agency and Southern Water as we have a shared desire to prevent similar incidents from occurring.*

*During the past couple of months, officers of the Council have also engaged with Southern Water on strategic planning matters and their draft business plan, which identifies priorities of protecting and improving our environment, healthy rivers and seas and providing a reliable supply of water to their customers. This plan details investment expected in the New Forest to deliver improvements to storm overflows and capacity of their networks and has been submitted to OFWAT for scrutiny prior to determination. We will continue to engage with Southern Water over the next few months as they begin to implement these plans.*

*As you will be aware, the Council supported our communities in response to the incident in November where over 18,000 properties along the Waterside were without drinking water and are continuing to work with our emergency planning partners to ensure Southern Water learn from this experience and put in place robust plans to improve resilience and reduce the likelihood of future incidents.*

## Question 2

### **From Cllr Woods to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden**

Fordingbridge Surgery recently contacted me about the increase in the price of the parking clocks. Specifically, they informed me that one member of staff has decided to leave to go to a job where they don't have to pay to park. In light of the failure to consult businesses and services before forcing through this massive increase, would the Portfolio Holder consider introducing a discounted parking clock for local businesses?

*Answer:*

*Our council car parks have a range of users, including visitors and tourists, shoppers, and those who work in nearby businesses. Our car parks are conveniently located and well maintained, and they therefore play a significant role in our local economy.*

*We also know, through benchmarking, that our parking clocks present outstanding value for money and provide a large saving compared to the equivalent pay and display costs.*

*As such our parking clocks already provide local businesses with a discounted parking scheme and we are delighted to see this continue.*

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

## Question 3

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

Following news of a further planned bailout, this would now be the 2nd bailout by New Forest Taxpayers since Freedom Leisure were handed the leisure centre contract. Does the Portfolio Holder agree that the Council should have done what the Liberal Democrats proposed at the time and waited until we were out of covid to decide what to do with the leisure service?

*Answer:*

*I welcome this question entirely as it gives me another opportunity to comment on how the Council has been financially well supported by Freedom Leisure in the first 2 years of the contract with them.*

*Yes, we paid a contractual management fee in year 1. This fee was half a million pounds less than the position originally forecast by the Council under the continuation of the in-house model. Do I think it the wrong decision to save the New Forest tax-payer half a million pounds in one year, absolutely not; I stand by it fully.*

*The matter of the significant and unforeseen utilities increase is very unfortunate, but again, I absolutely welcome the fact that we have a partner taking the significant lions-share of the increased costs, as opposed to those increased costs landing solely with this authority and so to the New Forest tax-payer.*

*I wonder, had Councillor Davies attended the recent all-member briefing on this subject, I'm not sure he would have asked this question at all.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question referring to the closure of leisure centres in other areas operated by Freedom, the Portfolio Holder reiterated that he was happy with the*

*level of service being provided and that five centres remained open for business in the New Forest.*

#### **Question 4**

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

In the year ending July 2022 there were 12,174 incidents of reported crime in the New Forest district a 17.3% rise on the previous year ending in July 2021, what is this authority doing to combat this growth in crime beyond putting in some more CCTV cameras?

*Answer:*

*As my fellow Member will recall, the period July 2020 – July 2021 was a time when England was under much social restrictions. The impact of two full lockdowns, the rule of six, businesses mandated to close, a 10pm curfew for the hospitality sector with social restrictions only ending in July 2021 widespread, also interrupted social behaviours and crime locally and nationally.*

*I am pleased to advise that as Chair of the Safer New Forest Strategy and Delivery Group, I see first-hand, the commitment and collaboration of representatives from the Safer New Forest partnership. Through the formulation of the annual strategic assessment of crime and disorder partnership plan to address crime and disorder issues, this Council, with the support and shared vision of our partners, is intrinsically involved in addressing crime and disorder in our communities. Let me touch on some specifics:-*

- Protecting our most vulnerable children through positive safeguarding actions through the Missing, Exploited and Trafficked group and Local Children's Partnership.*
- NFDC lead the district wide Domestic Abuse Forum, providing training to frontline practitioners, supporting victims of domestic abuse and resourcing local services for New Forest residents experiencing harm.*
- Working alongside our partners in Police, Probation, Adult Services and Health, operating tactically to interrupt offending behaviour and divert offenders through positive opportunities and channels of change.*
- Representing the needs of the New Forest to the Home Office and securing additional financial awards for rural communities. For implementing preventative measures for protecting violence against women & girls.*

*It is through a coordinated approach with our partners, that the total New Forest crime is equivalent to 0.3% of England's total crime incidents in the year. The findings from the serious violence assessment confirm the New Forest had lower rates of violence with injury, robbery, and possession of a weapon compared to other Hampshire authorities, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth & Southampton and England averages.*

*I am pleased to confirm that through this dedicated approach, the New Forest remains a safe place to live, work and visit being the 118th safest non-metropolitan district in England (of 181 total) by order of crime.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question on increased crime in the New Forest and measures to make residents feel safer, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the upcoming CCTV project that would deliver effective outcomes in this area.*

#### **Question 5**

##### **From Cllr Clark to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden**

Following the recent announcement that the costs for implementing the Waste Strategy have now changed due to Government intervention. How much can we expect back from the Government on wasted costs, or will all be passed on to our Residents and taxpayers?

*Answer:*

*Members who attended the most recent Place and Sustainability Overview and Scrutiny Panel had the opportunity to receive an update and ask questions on the implications of “Simpler Recycling” as announced by the Prime Minister on 20 September. That update report also went through Cabinet last week. On both occasions it was made clear that the overall financial implications of the proposed changes, what funding is available, and how this Council will need to respond are still being worked through.*

*There is much in our Waste Strategy, including the rolling out of wheeled bins that will not need to change, and there is a clear alignment with our desire to increase recycling levels across the District.*

*Much investment already committed was required in any case, to ensure our refuse and recycling services were fit for the future. We expect there to be clarity from DEFRA in the coming weeks over funding for the roll out of elements of Simpler Recycling such as food waste. As stated in the report that went to Cabinet, officers will report back to Cabinet once we are able to fully quantify the financial implications.*

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

#### **Question 6**

##### **From Cllr Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden**

Parking charges are bringing in £1.2million but costs of car park maintenance are approximately £400,000 annually. Can the portfolio holder please explain what the excess profit is to be spent on?

*Answer:*

*The Council does not make “profit” on its car parks, any surplus revenue generated beyond the costs of maintenance and management funds the provision of other council services that our residents rely on, to support service delivery by the Council and as identified in our Medium Term Financial Plan is a key component of delivering a balanced budget.*

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

## **Question 7**

### **From Cllr Brand to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Tipp**

One of the key activities of the Business, Tourism and High Street Portfolio is to – identify all businesses in the District and target engagement with them. Could the Portfolio holder explain what this means and what this looks like?

*Answer:*

*The Portfolio in question is now the Planning and Economy Portfolio. Identifying all businesses in the District is a very high thing to achieve, with businesses coming and going all the time.*

*What we are trying to do is to contact those businesses who wish to engage and want our help. We send out 3,500 electronic newsletters to our businesses, alongside chambers of trade and local partners. We also run business support activities such as the recent and ongoing Rural Fund grants which are still open and businesses can apply for until March 2024.*

*Cabinet colleagues, officers and I meet regularly with representatives from some of our largest businesses, including the Association of British Ports, Exxon Mobil and those promoting Fawley Waterside.*

*In the New Year we will be launching the very popular ‘Shop Doctor’ scheme, a mystery shopper initiative. We are also very active with the New Forest Business Partnership.*

*I hope you will agree that this Council has an impressive record of engagement and it will continue to do so.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question on a straw poll conducted by Cllr Brand which raised some areas for consideration on effectively engaging local businesses, the Portfolio Holder welcomed the receipt of this poll so that officers could consider the data.*

## **Question 8**

### **From Cllr Millar to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Blunden**

Although many residents support this Council’s move to adopting wheelie bins, many do not. And on both sides there are people who are concerned about the implementation process, and in particular, where such bins will be stored. For example, a sizeable number of properties in Fordingbridge were built with brick bin stores, designed to hold dustbins. They will not be suitable for wheelie bins. Residents have been told that NFDC will be carrying out a survey of properties across the district to identify which properties will need alternatives to wheelie bins.

How is this assessment being conducted? Has any of Fordingbridge, Godshill and Hyde been surveyed? And are residents being engaged in the process? Our experience so far is that any assessment seems to be being carried out without any engagement with the local community, who are unaware of when to expect an assessment, how they might highlight their particular circumstances to officers, where to find the result for their household and how to appeal.

*Answer:*

*I am confident that our wheeled bins will present advantages that outweigh some of the perceived implications of the changeover. They will enable us to recycle more as a district, something that I hope we can all agree is essential. It will lead to less mess across the forest on collection days that so often results from our current environmentally unsustainable plastic bin bags being split by animals and birds. It will also present less of a health and safety risk to our dedicated and hard working bin crews.*

*I would call on all members of this Council to support the roll out and help reinforce some of this positive messaging to their constituents. As one Council we all have to do better to reduce our environmental impact, and I would hope that this is an issue that is above politics.*

*I expect that the absolute majority of New Forest homes will be able to accommodate our standardised offer. However, we also appreciate that there is a limited number of properties across the District that will not be suitable for the approved waste and recycling collection service. This is why we committed to carrying out a comprehensive survey of all properties to assess them for storage and access constraints associated with the use of wheeled bins.*

*The surveying of over 80,000 properties is a lengthy task and has now been ongoing since the summer 2023. The surveying is being carried out by Keep Britain Tidy, a leading environmental charity with experience of independently advising on such matters. Keep Britain Tidy have provided an efficient methodology and worked with us to build a bespoke survey for the New Forest.*

*Amongst other things, the survey accounts for properties with limited storage capacity, physical obstacles such as steps, and properties where access for the collection vehicles maybe limited.*

*The areas you mentioned, Fordingbridge, Godshill, and Hyde have all been partially surveyed so far and we expect that the surveying will be complete early in the spring and Keep Britain Tidy will then provide us with the survey results.*

*We will be writing to all householders ahead of the service go live to inform them of the containers they will receive; when they are likely to be delivered, and when the new collection service will start.*

*We have built into our timeline a period for residents who feel they have been offered the wrong service to raise any concerns, but the roll out will be based on facts and evidence, not personal preference. This period and process will be supported by waste advisors, who will be able to engage with residents to ensure the correct service is provided. We are currently finalising our timeline, but we know it is important to allow ample time for this process to take place ahead of the distribution of containers.*

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

## **Question 9**

### **From Cllr Haywood to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Cleary**

Members will likely have read in the press of the closure, by its current owners Carlsberg Marstons, of the Ringwood Brewery on Christchurch Road in Ringwood. From January, brewing and distribution of Ringwood ales there will cease, brewing transferring to the Midlands and distribution transferring well outside our district, with the sad loss of 10 jobs. Ringwood Brewery is highly regarded around the world as a trailblazer in the revival of traditional English ale and is a popular brand throughout our country. It is a source of pride

for many in Ringwood and more widely in the New Forest. Can I ask the Leader what steps this council has taken to help retain this iconic brand in its home town?

*Answer:*

*I share your concern that CMBC has taken the decision to close the iconic Ringwood brewery with such little notice.*

*As he says, the brewery puts Ringwood on the map as a popular brand throughout the country and is an important USP for the town at a time when our high streets need a diverse offer to thrive.*

*Clearly, there is a limited amount an authority can do in terms of the decisions of a private business to operate.*

*However, I am aware that there has been local interest in taking on the brewery through a consortium of interested parties and investors. I have committed to meet urgently with a representative of that consortium and as soon as I have done so I will ask officers to consider what, if any, actions we can take.*

## **Second Questions**

### **Question 10**

#### **From Cllr Rackham to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Cleary**

Our residents have recently had to contend with flooding, cut off water supply, sewerage dumps in rivers on numerous occasions and now a major issue with sewerage collection at Totton. I wonder if the council can acknowledge that Southern Water seems unable to provide an adequate service and look again at how NFDC should be planning for ongoing help to residents with not only Flood Action Plans for each area but also Water Collection and Supply Emergency planning to further support the residents where Southern Water is unable to do so.

*Answer:*

*I too, am very concerned about the recent events you have highlighted and the significant impact that this has had on our residents. This week, I, along with other Hampshire Local Authority Leaders, will be sending a letter to the Chief Executive of Southern Water.*

*This letter will set out our concerns over their performance and our diminished confidence in them, following the recent emergency responses affecting our communities. We will be proposing a meeting in the new year, in order for them to explain how they will learn from these past experiences and the improvements they have planned, to provide the service that our residents deserve.*

*To support this a thorough debrief and lessons learnt exercise is taking place at a multi-agency Local Resilience Forum level, following the water supply disruption incident in the Waterside area.*

*A report with findings will be presented to the Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, which will include cover the Council's own response during the incident and our recovery.*

*New Forest District Council officers work closely with Hampshire County Council and other partners, on how we continue to support our residents, identifying skills and assets within*

*communities and developing their community plans to help improve community resilience in the future.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question on practical steps the Council can take to support local communities through emergency planning incidents, the Leader highlighted this as one of the areas for consideration as part of the Local Resilience Forum debrief and review.*

## **Question 11**

### **From Cllr Haywood to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate, Cllr Heron**

When people face significant changes to their detriment, it is normal to expect that some change their behaviour to avoid that detriment. This behaviour change can also have indirect side effects in areas seemingly loosely connected to the change in question. Given the eye-watering increase in long stay parking charges, what modelling of such behaviour change has this council done, if so what did that modelling reveal, and does it anticipate any impact on its headline revenue increase from this?

*Answer:*

*The revised car parking fees still compare well with neighbouring authorities and present excellent value for money. The council is not expecting a significant reduction in the usage of its car parks as a result but will monitor this as part of its regular financial reporting. In addition, as outlined in October's Cabinet report, a new Parking Strategy will be developed to inform the long term approach to provision of parking in NFDC. The Parking Task and Finish Group is meeting for the first time tomorrow to begin this work, which will include engagement with service users and other stakeholders.*

*Note – in response to a supplementary question on initiatives being explored by Town and Parish Councils to mitigate behaviour changes, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the role of Hampshire County Council as part of on-street car parking and the ability of all agencies to respond appropriately to any car parking displacement.*