

FULL COUNCIL – 8 APRIL 2024 – QUESTIONS UNDER STANDING ORDER 22

First Questions

Question 1

From Cllr David Harrison to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Geoff Blunden

What is the estimated cost of repairing all of the damage to the Rumbridge Street car park in Totton, by permitting the heavy tanker lorries, contracted by Southern Water, to drive onto the car park?

Answer:

Southern Water approached the Council at short notice because of an emergency, to request access to sewers within Rumbridge Street car park. This was to help them mitigate the impact of a burst sewer in the local area. The Council was very happy to co-operate with Southern Water and their contractor restoring local services was clearly in our residents' interest.

As on previous occasions, it was agreed with Southern Water that any damage resulting from their short-term operation from the car park would be repaired at Southern Water's cost. As such, NFDC is not aware of the costs of repair, but does note that the resurfacing and repair works are currently underway.

Note – in response to a supplementary question which highlighted the responsibility to apologise to residents, the Portfolio Holder reiterated his understanding of the challenges faced by Southern Water and that the Council does what it can to support them in such emergency situations.

Question 2

From Cllr Caroline Rackham to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary

Would the Leader join me in a letter to our two local MPs asking them to look into why Southern Water claims they are legally allowed to dump sewage into rivers up to 10 times a year and what can be done to change this?

Answer:

The Government produced a Storm Overflow Discharge Reduction Plan in September 2023 to tackle the impacts of storm overflows. This plan details the targets for water companies to meet regarding the number of releases and where it is permitted up to 2050. I am pleased that new duties in the Environment Act 2021 will now give the Regulator tools to hold water companies to account and take enforcement action where they are not meeting their legal obligations.

Members and Officers from the Council attended a Southern Water Drop in Event in Totton on 21 March, where our concerns were raised relating to water supplies and foul water infrastructure in the district. Discussions also took place around measures being introduced to reduce the use of storm overflows and Southern Water's future investment plans.

This Council will continue to hold Southern Water to account and only last Friday I wrote, with the full backing of our Chief Executive, Kate Ryan, to request Southern Water attend a

member session later this year, with the aim that members from all parties can put resident concerns to their representatives regarding both sewerage discharge, and water supply issues. I will keep Members informed once this meeting has been scheduled.

Question 3

From Cllr Jack Davies to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness, Cllr Steve Davies

Will the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness meet with Hampshire County Council to discuss the possibility of using the Solent Mead Care Home site in Lymington to build much-needed affordable housing?

Answer:

In July last year we were made aware of the County Council's possible plans to close the Solent Mead Care Home in Lymington, subject to consultation. In August our Chief Executive wrote to Hampshire County Council's Chief Executive Carolyn Williamson setting out this Council's interest in acquiring both Solent Mead and Cranleigh Paddock in Lyndhurst for potential affordable housing redevelopment. And in November, as part of the formal public consultation process, Officers again expressed interest in both sites to further our affordable housing ambitions.

Since the County Council made its decision to close Solent Mead in February no further updates have been received, however we will write to the Chief Executive once again setting out our considerable interest in these sites, and I will be pleased to share the response with the Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, and Councillor Davies.

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

Question 4

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

In the 22/23 figures, amongst our New Forest school age children there are 19% on free school meals compared to 18.3% across the county and 18.8% across the South East region. These figures equate to 4,022 children being in poverty. Having looked at the Residents action plan I note there is nothing directly focused on reducing Child Poverty in this district, does this administration feel there is no need for any direct action?

Answer:

We fully recognise there are households in our district who struggle financially, which is why this Council, via the new Corporate Plan, is committed to several key priorities aimed at helping those in our community in the greatest need.

Figures from the DWP show an improvement in local figures with 12.7% of children in the district living in a family whose income was below 60% of average household income, down from 15% the year before and lower than the UK rate of 20.1%. (Source: [DWP Local Authority Data](#))

Whilst this Council is unable to directly influence some of the root causes of poverty there are several initiatives this Council supports.

The Cost-of-Living Steering group continues to raise the profile of such issues and is delivering joint projects with our partners, whilst an extensive Action Plan was presented to the Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 20 March 2024, and I would refer members to the published report.

We continue to support our Community Grants programme and CIL fund awards, we have hosted a Cost-of-Living Community Forum, and we are wholly supportive of the employment and training creation ambitions generated by the Freeport to improve access to jobs for local residents, and finally, along with our partners we aim together deliver over 800 new low-cost social housing rented properties across the district by the end of the year.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on an increasing number of children going into poverty, the Portfolio Holder reiterated his priorities in this area, including the establishment of the Community Forum, which supported key partnership working.

Question 5

From Cllr Sean Cullen to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Cleary

The Freeport has been in place for around 2 years and NFDC represents the interests of residents across the whole district so it is important that we have a clear aspirational plan for what businesses will move into the port and the impact they will have.

I wonder if the Leader can tell me what type of businesses are being encouraged to be part of the freeport and how they will further the interests of the national park, as they are now requested to do in law.

Answer:

The Full Business Case submitted to government as part of the Freeport bidding process set out the target market sectors for tax sites. The business case envisages a wide range of users at Southampton Water including: automotive handling; port centric logistics; marine manufacturing; high technology businesses including AI; renewable energy; and advanced manufacturing.

Any decision to grant business rates relief to businesses moving onto tax sites ultimately rests with the Council as they are the ratings authority. A reason for not awarding relief could be that a business does not reflect the target sector of the Freeport or does not contribute to one of the three national Freeport objectives, namely supporting national hubs for trade, creating hotbeds of innovation or promoting regeneration. This allows for appropriate check and balances that occupiers benefiting from incentives are meeting the objectives of the Freeport.

The Freeport has recently appointed a Trade and Investment manager who will work with the Council and the Department of Business and Trade to maximise investment into Freeport tax sites. This is a major resource focusing on economic growth in the New Forest.

Whilst businesses choosing to locate in Freeport tax sites benefit from considerable tax incentives, they still have to comply with all appropriate legal requirements.

In relation to the National Park, On 3 April, Cabinet approved a set of priorities in respect of the legacy of the Solent Freeport for the New Forest. Environmental sustainability was identified as a core priority. The report identified that “a successful Freeport should see a significant enhancement of our National Park offer but also connectivity between our Waterside communities and the Park itself.”

Question 6

From Cllr Stephanie Osborne to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Derek Tipp

Will the Portfolio Holder invite representatives from Associated British Ports to come in and share what plans they have for Dibden Bay?

Answer:

I am pleased to confirm that ABP representatives will be attending a briefing session on Tuesday 30 April for all Members at which they will be setting out their proposals for their Freeport sites and taking questions and I would urge those interested to attend.

Question 7

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

Will the Portfolio Holder please give clear details on the current state of play at the Fawley Waterside development? There has been much speculation in local media about the site being scaled back but these amount to mere rumours. Can the Council confirm that the figure of 1380 new homes is still a target?

Answer:

The Council's understanding of the latest position was reported through written reports to both Place & Sustainability Overview & Scrutiny Panel on 7 March 2024, and subsequently to Cabinet on 3 April 2024.

This stated that Fawley Waterside is one of the biggest brownfield redevelopment schemes in the south of England which has a resolution to grant outline planning permission for a residential led mixed use scheme including approximately 10 hectares of land in the northern part of the site for business and industrial uses.

The S106 which would finalise the planning consent has not been signed by the developer which makes the timing of development uncertain.

New investors have come on board and there is a new management team. Initial discussions with that team have taken place and updated proposals are awaited.

Fawley Waterside remains a site that is allocated for development in the existing adopted Local Plan for 1380 dwellings.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the S106 agreement and timeframes, the Portfolio Holder confirmed a specific time frame had not yet been identified by the new investors at this stage.

Question 8

From Cllr Ian Murray to the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing, Cllr Dan Poole

As Vice-Chairman of the Housing and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, I have, as yet been unable to attend the new Community Forum. Can the Portfolio Holder please update us on its progress?

Answer:

I am extremely pleased to update members with progress of the Forum. Our second event was held only recently on March 27th and focussed on improving Community Resilience across the many different communities of the New Forest.

With nearly 70 people in attendance representing the Council, our key partners and agencies involved in providing an emergency response, and our Towns and Parish Councils, attendees heard what is required to create community plans to prevent and respond to local issues such as flooding or power outages. Now launched, this work stream will continue to support Town and Parish Councils and be facilitated by Officers with responsibility for Emergency Planning. A follow up session will focus on the response to a simulated incident.

Our first Forum was held last October on the subject of Cost of Living and brought together nearly 80 people representing our key voluntary partners from many organisations across the district working with vulnerable people as well as those leading initiatives in our Town and Parish Councils. We received excellent feedback and it was attendees themselves who put forward the request for a Forum on Community Resilience.

Members have already heard how the cost of living work continues to be supported by officers and planning is already underway for a third forum in the Autumn.

Second Questions

Question 9

From Cllr Caroline Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing, Cllr Dan Poole

While the police service has increased numbers of newly trained officers, there has continued to be a problem with retention which has led to more than 400 fewer police officers in total for Hampshire. Would NFDC's Portfolio Holder on Community Safety push for additional PCSOs to be recruited in the New Forest and write to the PCC asking for more Officers for our District? And is now the time for NFDC to consider recruiting our own ACSOs to combat ASB and low-level crime, to assist in our Community Safety priorities which Residents care about hugely?

Answer:

Hampshire & IOW's Chief Constable Scott Chiltern, during a recent visit to meet with senior officers and the Leader, presented his new local policing model where specialist officers have been relocated back to local areas of the New Forest. Neighbourhood officers will be joined by patrol officers and CID to meet their aims of collectively supporting local area officers in responding to and preventing crimes.

With that in mind I wish to refer the member to a previous question from Cllr M Wade in April 2023 regarding the role of ACSOs, where this matter was answered previously.

Previously Hampshire County Council and relevant contributing authorities withdrew support for the Accredited Community Support Officer scheme as it was identified that the work of the service overlapped with the role of PCSOs. This model of Police engagement and community reassurance has extended further with the New Forest being supported by 20 full time PCSOs.

As chair of the safer New Forest, Community Safety Strategy and Delivery Group, I was encouraged to see partners from over 35 organisations across the district attend the community partnership event held in Lyndhurst for the development of the Partnership Action Group and to show their commitment to work collaboratively across the district.

With this partnership going from strength to strength and changes to the local policing model combined with our new Corporate Plan, which delivers a clear commitment to reducing the fear of crime, this collective approach focussing on victims and offenders will continue to ensure that the New Forest remains a safe place to live, work and visit.

Question 10

From Cllr Malcolm Wade to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary

As the Freeport is a key component on the Council's 2024-2028 Corporate Plan, and is the headline focus for the 'Prosperity' section of the plan. It is fair to say The Cabinet are enthusiastic about the Solent Freeport project and it's seen as a key driver of NFDC's future economic growth and investment plans for the District. However, what scrutiny, and checks and balances are in place to ensure that NFDC Residents and Businesses will genuinely benefit?

Answer:

We are supportive of the Freeport process as it provides considerable benefit to businesses who want to invest in our district which can be a major contributor to our economic growth and to ensuring a supply of highly skilled jobs for our residents. Additionally, the ability of the Freeport to re-invest retained business rates provides an opportunity the New Forest and the region as a whole to identify and fund regeneration priorities.

A report on Freeport priorities went to the Place and Sustainability Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 7 March 2024. Following that opportunity for elected Members to scrutinise the report, on 3 April Cabinet agreed the following priorities against which a successfully delivered Solent Freeport would be judged in relation to the New Forest:

- *Transport and Wider infrastructure*
- *Employment and Skills*
- *Prosperous Communities*
- *Environmental Sustainability*
- *The Development of a Local Delivery Plan*

Decisions in relation to the Freeport are made by the Solent Freeport Board. A sub-committee of the Freeport Board has been established to ensure the appropriate scrutiny and checks and balances are in place. The Leader of the Council sits on that sub-committee and is supported by the Council's S151 officer. In addition, Portsmouth City Council provide

an Accountable Body function to the Freeport and would be expected by government to ensure there is proper scrutiny of Freeport decision making.