

**Full Council – 14 October 2024 – Questions Under Standing Order
22**

First Questions

Question 1

**From Cllr John Haywood to the Leader Council, Cllr Jill Cleary
(answered by the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate, Cllr
Jeremy Heron)**

Members will likely have heard in the news that up to 880,000 low-income pensioners nationally are not claiming the Pension Credit to which they are entitled, something that can be worth up to £3,900 a year for some of the most vulnerable pensioners in our community. Can I ask the Leader what steps this Council is taking to ensure that the uptake of this vital benefit is increased in our area, so that our pensioners with the lowest incomes obtain the financial support that they need?

Reply:

We are always proactive in promoting and raising awareness of entitlement to state benefits, as well as other forms of support, to ensure residents get what they are entitled to. This includes Pension Credit, where we have reviewed the data we hold to write to low income households who could be entitled to this benefit. Since 2022, we have undertaken this exercise on three separate occasions, writing to over 170 households, and we know 54 are now getting Pension Credit following our contact, getting on average additional income of £53 per week, which, thanks to our intervention, makes a huge difference to these low income households and means they are entitled to other help and support.

As we know some pensioners may struggle to make their claim, we have worked with Citizens Advice New Forest and Age Concern to support these households, by including their details in the letters we send. We have monitored the response and we have contacted households by phone to encourage claiming Pension Credit where they have yet to do so. We have used social media and the residents email to promote awareness, including text directed at residents who may know someone who may be eligible to claim, as well as articles in Hometalk and promotion at Community Hubs and with our local partner organisations.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on signposting residents to additional funding streams, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the excellent work of officers in keeping abreast of the latest opportunities and legislation in support of residents.

Question 2

From Cllr Mark Clark to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary

With the abandonment of the Exxon Fawley Pipeline and carbon capture project, the withdrawal of the Fawley Waterside Development and the recent announcement of the reduction in jobs into the area, can we get an apology from the Leader of this Council, of leading everyone up the garden path about the magical benefits of the Solent Freeport less than two years ago in this very Chamber?

Reply:

Cllr Clark, the carbon capture project was never a freeport related activity, it wasn't taking place in one of the tax sites. However, the Exxon FASST project is taking place on a tax site, and is forecast to be finished and operational early into the new year. The Solent Gateway tax site is also progressing and once live, the retained business rates from these two sites will begin to accrue, and as far as I'm aware, the new plant will require people to operate it, as will the new activities planned for the Gateway site, ergo job creation.

Yes, the withdrawal of the Fawley planning application is unfortunate, but the prospect of there being viable commercial space within the Fawley Waterside tax site is still very real.

The view I take in my role as Leader is a long-term one, and so on the basis of the Freeport being a 25 year designation, I still look forward to the opportunities it will bring to the New Forest, including new jobs and opportunities to our residents and significant retained business rates for the area.

Rome wasn't built in a day Cllr Clark, and it's slightly disappointing that you're not able to see the bigger picture in terms of what the Freeport will bring to our area and our residents over the medium to long term.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the timing for benefits to Freeport status, the Leader of the Council urged Members to be patient, given the project's 25 year time span.

Question 3

From Cllr Jack Davies to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary (answered by the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate, Cllr Jeremy Heron)

The residents of Lymington and Pennington are very concerned about the future of our Town Hall in Avenue Road. The lease is up in 2027 and this Council clearly has no intention of extending it. Whilst it is early in the process, the one overwhelming desire of residents is that, if something is done with the site, it is not sold off to a developer like Churchill who will build yet another block of luxury retirement flats. Can the Leader of the Council promise me the site will not be sold off for Luxury Retirement Flats?

Reply:

Cllr Davies, it would be incredibly irresponsible of me to make such a promise. You have already been advised that Councillors will be involved and engaged in the process to determine the future of the site, and so you will have plenty of opportunity to make your thoughts known in the build-up to the council making a collective decision on this matter in this chamber.

As with any potential disposal of land, the decision will need to be in conformity with Section 123(2) of the Local Government Act 1972.

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

Question 4

From Cllr David Millar to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Geoffrey Blunden

Given the proposal to increase the £1 parking charge to £1.50, has the Portfolio Holder given any thought to a similar 50% increase in the number of 'free parking' days allowed in NFDC car parks? The benefits of these days are well known, and the four days currently granted by NFDC provide a welcome boost to local high streets in Fordingbridge and across the district. Would the Portfolio Holder consider allowing two further days, for a total of 6, with the extra two days able to be used outside of December? These can be promoted as a way of encouraging local shopping other than at Christmas, as an investment in keeping our high streets alive.

Reply:

The £1 parking fee for 1 hour had been in place since 2018, and it was no longer viable to retain this rate in the face of inflation in the years since. This is part of the administration's efforts to maintain balanced budgets by reasonable and proportionate reviews of all fees and charges. When benchmarked, £1.50 per hour still represents good value when compared with neighbouring authorities.

Cllr Millar will hopefully be aware that on 30th September, I approved a Portfolio Holder Decision which confirmed that for the Christmas period this year, 4 days of free parking will be available, on 7th December (small business Saturday), the last weekend before Christmas, and an additional day which can be requested by Town and Parish Councils whom wish to support local events on a day of their choosing.

This supports our town and parish partners, local businesses and residents and I am pleased to see it continue.

I am not, until now, aware of a demand for additional days. Officers, supported by a cross-party member task and finish group, are preparing a new Parking Strategy for NFDC to come forward for Council approval in the Spring. I will ensure that the pros and cons of such a proposal are considered as part of a joined up and strategic approach to parking management in the longer term.

And of course, if precepting Town and Parish Councils want to discuss how they could look to fund free parking schemes themselves, as they set their own budgets and local council tax rates, I am sure my Cabinet colleague for Finance would be happy to hear their proposals.

Question 5

From Cllr Malcolm Wade to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate, Cllr Jeremy Heron

Last year the New Forest District Council had £2.132 million of interest income over the budgeted amount. Based upon the current interest rates please can you advise how much projected interest income the Council will be receiving and how much you actually budgeted for in the first place?

Reply:

Thank you Cllr Wade, for once again giving me the opportunity to congratulate the Council on approving such a sound and robust Treasury

Management Strategy, which resulted in the Council being able to return such significant interest earnings last financial year.

Whilst I cannot guarantee the same level of return for the current financial year, due to our continued significant investment in new affordable housing, our investment in transformation, and of course the new infrastructure required to deliver our new modernised waste service, I can confirm that I am reasonably confident that we will exceed our originally budgeted target of £1.6m in the current financial year, and that this increased return will once again support other Council services requiring financial support. I am currently working with officers on the quarter 2 financial monitoring report for the November Cabinet, where the latest assumptions will be finalised and included within that report.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the use of previous interest earnings in support of council services, the Portfolio Holder highlighted that financial monitoring reports, and the Medium Term Financial Plan were both transparent in identifying how income was used across the Council.

Question 6

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

At what stage did the Cabinet know that we seem to have been involved in a bidding war regarding the Exxon pipeline which ultimately went to the North of the Country and nowhere near the National Park or the Isle Of Wight? Also, how many hours of Officer and Councillor time were spent on the recent, and in the end, pointless consultation?

Reply:

My Cabinet colleagues and I were not aware at any stage of the "bidding war" you refer to. We are all aware of the government funding of £22 billion over 25 years announced for projects on CO2 capture in the North, but we do not know if any of this money could have gone to the Exxon Pipe-line project here in the New Forest.

Regarding officer and councillor time, I believe it was not pointless, but important for us to make a considered response to the Exxon consultation as, at the time, we believed that the project would proceed, and not to respond would have been to neglect our duty to our residents.

Had the project proceeded we would have required a lot more information to understand the rationale for it before we could take a view on support or otherwise.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the difficulty of responding to technical consultations on complex issues, the Portfolio Holder highlighted the importance of responding to consultations where it provided the platform to represent the views of residents to the Government on significant issues.

Question 7

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

Please can you provide a breakdown of how many individual parking clocks were sold for the calendar year 2024, compared to 2023, following the significant price rises agreed last year? And will there be review of provision of short stay parking provision in areas such as Calshot where it has been requested?

Reply:

In terms of individual clock sales, short stay clock sales were 22,105 in 2023 versus 20,451 in 2024. Long stay annual clocks were 4,245 in 2023 and 2,923 in 2024, and quarterly clocks (excluding the October to December quarter) were 4,179 in 2023 and 4,136 in 2024.

In total, this amounts to a reduction of less than 10% in individual clock sales, but by the end of August 2024, income from parking clocks and pay and display sales was £670,000 higher than the same period in the previous year, meaning that the changes made by this administration have made a significant contribution to our Medium Term Financial Plan.

As highlighted earlier, the Parking Strategy being developed will address our future approach to parking provision, including options around the splits between long and short stay spaces, to ensure our offer remains cost effective and convenient for residents and visitors.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the use of internal data as part of future car parking fees and charges decision making, the Portfolio Holder agreed this could be provided.

Question 8

From Cllr Colm McCarthy to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Derek Tipp

Does the Portfolio Holder agree that conditions placed on planning applications must be followed through and that, when conditions are not met, the Planning Committee must hold those applicants to account?

Reply:

I hope that Cllr McCarthy will agree that it is not for me as the Cabinet Member for Planning and Economy to dictate to Planning Committee how to undertake their duties.

What I do know is that enforcement is discretionary, and the Council must act proportionately. There will always be times where conditions might need to be changed, for any number of reasons, and the right course of action is for the applicant to seek the consent of the Council through the planning process.

If the Council becomes aware of a breach of a planning condition it can take actions to remedy this.

The role of planning enforcement is to investigate and resolve breaches of planning control, and to ensure that planning harm is remedied. There are a range of enforcement powers that the local authority can employ as well as specific timeframes for taking action.

Our Local Enforcement Plan adopted in April 2022 outlines our approach to encouraging compliance with our regulations and policies in a way that is in line with current government legislation and guidance.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on breaches to planning conditions, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that the planning enforcement team would deal with these issues.

Question 9

From Cllr Sean Cullen to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Geoffrey Blunden

In addition to the consideration given to Residents living in flats, for the roll-out of wheelie bins. Will the same consideration be given to properties in Village and Town Centres with nowhere for storage or access for the bins? And have NFDC Officers had an opportunity to review Keep Britain Tidy's recommendations, and are there any concerns or challenges our Waste and Recycling Team have reported yet, following the property surveys?

Reply:

The Council's approved Waste Strategy and Collection Policy is clear that the vast majority of our residents, for the core service, will include two wheeled bins, one for waste and one for recycling collections. There may be some circumstances where this is not appropriate. One of criteria is a

lack of space for storage of containers. This has been independently assessed by Keep Britain tidy.

As part of our communications with residents in the run up to our service changes in 2025 and 2026, residents will be notified of the arrangements in advance for their property.

Officers' review of the Keep Britain Tidy data, suggests that alternatives to wheeled bins may be required for about 5% of households surveyed within the District.

Note – the 30 minute time limit for questions expired during the reply to this question and a supplementary question was therefore not offered to Cllr Cullen.

Second Questions

Question 10

From Cllr John Haywood to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Geoffrey Blunden

Fly-tipping is a menace to our area and it is right that the perpetrators are pursued vigorously. The image of piles of fly-tipped waste blighting the green verges of our beautiful lanes is not something that our residents want. However side-waste at community recycling banks – often when those banks are full – is classified as fly-tipping and enforcement action is taken. Can the Portfolio Holder specify what percentage of fly-tipping enforcement relates to side-waste at recycling banks, rather than the kind of fly-tipping that normally springs to mind?

Reply:

I am glad that there is agreement across the Chamber that fly tipping is a scourge on our beautiful district. I made exactly that point when I wrote recently to the Leader of Hampshire County Council, affirming this Council's view that the closure of Household Waste Recycling Centres would have had a detrimental effect on the New Forest, with even more waste dumped both in the forest, and outside the clearly defined provisions of the local bring sites that we run for the recycling of excess glass and cardboard.

I am very pleased that Cllr Nick Adams King, and his Cabinet at Hampshire have listened to our views, and it has been confirmed that Somerley and Marchwood Household Waste Recycling Tips will not be closed to fund the current round of County Council savings.

Unfortunately, despite a comprehensive household waste collection service and a separate business waste service offered by the Council, a lot of items presented at bring sites are not suitable for recycling and are in fact general waste. Whether left on the floor or in a container, this is not an acceptable use of these facilities and our officers act accordingly in investigating and take action where needed.

Examples, including bags of identifiable household waste deposited in cardboard recycling, the dumping of building waste and a regular range of electrical items, none of which are appropriate or accepted at our clearly signed bring sites. Pro-active enforcement by our officers meant that 57% were for a range of business and household waste offences at bring sites, and helps ensure the bins are filled only with material that is accepted so there is capacity for genuine users.

Within this administration's Corporate Plan is an action to develop an Environmental Enforcement Policy, which will further define when, how and why we take action to tackle flytipping offences in all their forms.

In the meantime the eyes and ears of our enforcement teams, council employees and members, and our CCTV network are open as we continue to take on those who seek to misuse our facilities or damage our natural environment.

Note – this question was dealt with in writing, having fallen outside of the 30 minute time limit at the Council meeting.