

Council – 9 December 2024 – Questions Under Standing Order 22

First Questions

Question 1

From Cllr Alan Alvey to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Derek Tipp

At a recent Parish Council community consultation held to consider the recent revised planning application submitted for the Fawley Waterside site, it was clear that some residents believed that, because of the Freeport Zone status, NFDC would not be able to refuse the application.

Would the Portfolio Holder please confirm the situation with planning applications for sites within the Freeport Zone.

Reply:

I can confirm that the designation of the Fawley Waterside site as a Solent Freeport tax site does not alter the legal framework within which any planning application made to the District Council would need to be determined.

This legal framework provides for such applications to be determined against the policies of the Local Plan, unless there are material planning considerations which indicate otherwise. It is worth remembering that Fawley Waterside is a brownfield site and has in large part been used for historic and current commercial and industrial uses, not least as a power station with the associated levels of activity and vehicle movements.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on alleged breaches of planning conditions, the Portfolio Holder referenced the Council's adopted approach to planning enforcement.

Question 2

From Cllr Jack Davies to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Geoffrey Blunden

Residents are rightly dismayed at the state of the public toilets in New Street, Lymington. Lymington is the retail capital of the New Forest but the state of these toilets are an embarrassment. When will these toilets be refurbished to the same standard as other local public toilets?

Reply:

The Council has 23 public conveniences across the district, provided free of charge, for residents and visitors to use. We have a rolling programme of maintenance and upgrading. In the meantime, these facilities are cleaned and restocked daily, 364 days of the year. In addition, our Streetscene supervisors undertake regular checks of the standards of the works achieved by our cleaners, to ensure it meets the requirements of their role.

Unfortunately, the toilets are only as clean as the last user left them in and not every user respects keeping the facility in the condition the cleaner achieved.

More worryingly has been the recent spate of vandalism of our facilities, from graffiti to fire setting to the breaking of equipment specifically installed to support our disabled communities. It is a district wide issue.

We report this criminal damage to the police and submit the evidence available to us. Our teams turn around any damage caused by vandalism or anti-social behaviour as efficiently as possible, and I know councillors will be as dismayed as I am that our facilities are so often vandalised and put out of action in this way.

Turning to the concerns raised over New Street in Lymington. I am sure the Cllr is aware, as a local Ward Member, there have recently been times where homeless people have sought to occupy some of the cubicles at the facility and this has limited regular access for cleaning staff, and also the public.

Homelessness is something that concerns all of us in this chamber, and the fact that someone feels that one of our toilet cubicles is their best chance of a suitable shelter will be of concern to us all. I'm pleased to say that our Homelessness Team are working hard to support these individuals, and as a by-product of this support, enable us to bring the cubicles back into use.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the refurbishment of the toilets, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that all public conveniences were reviewed annually as part of a priority list for appropriate refurbishment.

Question 3

From Cllr David Millar to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economy, Cllr Derek Tipp

Farming is of strategic importance to the UK, providing food security for our nation, reducing food miles, and providing well-managed countryside for our communities to enjoy. However, the NFDC's current call for sites will mean developers encouraging farm owners to offer up their land for speculative development opportunities. Can you tell me how this Council balances the need to support our farmers whilst also looking to meet Government house-building targets?

Reply:

The Call for Site exercise currently underway is an opportunity for people to put forward land for consideration for development, or which they feel could be used more productively in the future. It's an important part of work to help inform our Local Plan Review including future decisions about how we deliver sustainable development in the New Forest.

As you will be aware from previous briefings, any such plan also needs to be prepared in the context of national planning policies as set out by the government.

It is very clear that this government is prioritising a significant increase in house building across the country. However, it is also clear that some areas of the country are far more capable of delivering significant housing growth than ours.

This very point was made by me in response to the government consultation on these proposals when I wrote a separate letter to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Angela Rayner on 24th September.

Your point about the possible loss of productive farmland is well made and is something we will have to balance in the round as we make our new Local Plan.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on monitoring the loss of farmland to development, the Portfolio Holder suggested that he might be able to supply this data outside of the meeting following consultation with officers.

Question 4

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

With a Labour Government driving the push for larger Unitary Authorities, how will you ensure that the unique needs of the Community won't be overshadowed by the priorities of a much larger administrative body?

Reply:

Whilst there is much speculation as to the Labour Government's views on the future shape of local government we know that one size doesn't fit all – and that the New Forest is a unique place. With the National Park at the heart of our place we have communities that have connections west towards Christchurch, North towards Salisbury, and across the water. We have yet to see the much discussed Devolution White paper.

When this is eventually published we will be able to review what the range of proposals are and prepare our response as a Council accordingly. I also attend meetings of the leaders of Hampshire and Isle of Wight councils and we will within these forums look to represent the district's interests.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the needs of residents as part of any developing proposals, the Leader reaffirmed her commitment to representing the district and its residents' interests as part of ongoing discussions.

Question 5

From Cllr Stephanie Osborne to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Geoffrey Blunden

Will the Council carry out a cost benefit analysis of constructing canopies with solar panels on District Council car parks?

Reply:

As Cllr Osborne will be aware, the Council is currently preparing a Parking Strategy for the District.

This strategy will create a vision for the future of our car parks and identify viable long-term options for the parking estate, look to support

new technologies, respond to the climate agenda, identify development opportunities and potentially generate more sustainable income levels.

I can confirm that an initial review of the viability of solar canopies will be considered as part of this strategy, which will come forward for consideration and approval in the spring next year.

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

Question 6

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

Can the Leader confirm how much in business rates and net gain NFDC have received currently from the Solent Freeport sites?

Reply:

Given my previous responses in this Chamber, and the various member briefings on the Freeport in the past, I suspect Cllr Rackham knows the answer to this question already.

Retained business rates are only generated by new development on the tax sites and can only be collected when they are operational. These developments need to secure planning permission and be built and occupied, but the incentive of the tax breaks is there for businesses who seek to locate and develop there. Landowners have until 2031 to complete and occupy developments to gain business rate reliefs.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on competing with other local authorities, the Leader confirmed that the relevant business rates would be retained in the district.

Question 7

From Cllr David Harrison to the Portfolio Holder for Community, Safety and Wellbeing, Cllr Dan Poole

Following the excellent local campaign being run by the 'Waterside Changemakers' what is NFDC doing to help address the lack of reliable and affordable transport options, which is leaving many Residents isolated or reliant on cars? And is this not an opportunity to be proactive and

work with County, Town and Parish Councils on a genuine issue for our Residents?

Reply:

Thank you for raising this matter. I share Cllr Harrison's and fellow councillors' concerns about the accessibility of services and facilities for many of our residents. Particularly those who don't have access to cars. Officers are in regular discussion with both parish and county council officers on a range of current transport matters and are exploring how best to support those communities most recently affected by changes to public transport routes.

In the longer term, the Local Plan provides an opportunity to explore whether there are longer term and more strategic interventions that can be made to improve the sustainability and accessibility of our communities. Members will be aware that an initial consultation will be undertaken on the issues and scope of the Local Plan early next year.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on support for community transport, the Portfolio Holder reiterated that officers were in discussion with partners on the relevant issues raised.

Question 8

From Cllr Hilary Brand to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary

How does the Council plan to increase transparency and public engagement in its decision making process, particularly when major policies often seem to be decided behind closed doors?

Reply:

I must say I do not recognise the assertion being made in this question. The Council's Key Policy Framework governs those major policies and strategies that are required by law to be determined by Council, or that this Council has decided locally should be determined by Full Council.

Since the May 2023 elections, this Council has had lively debates and determined a number of key strategies and policies in an open and transparent manner, including our New Corporate Plan and Performance Management Framework, our Transformation Strategy, Customer Strategy, Tenant Engagement Strategy, and commencing a new Local Plan Review to name a few. Not only has the Council debated and determined these issues at this meeting, many of those subjects have had significant cross-party input through the work of Overview and Scrutiny Panels, and Task and Finish Groups.

Day to day executive decision making is made by the Council's Cabinet and my individual portfolio holders that have those delegated powers, as set out in our Constitution. This is entirely appropriate within our agreed Cabinet form of governance that provides strong accountable leadership and decision making.

Decision making is open and transparent and the accessibility provided by our high quality live streaming of public meetings is evidenced by the engagement of over 20,000 views on the Council's Youtube channel since the May 2023 elections.

Having said that as Leader I am always willing to follow up any specific concerns Members may have as best I can.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on levels of public engagement, particularly on Council run consultations, the Leader of the Council committed to looking at any further ways the Council could increase engagement in this area.

Question 9

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

Please can the portfolio holder update Council on the number of Families and Single people on the NFDC's housing waiting list? And how many have we successfully housed and provided suitable accommodation for since the last update?

Reply:

Out of a total of 2,008 households there are currently 980 families on the housing register who have at least one child aged under 18. There are 780 single person households. The balance is made up of other families and couples.

In the last two months 94 households have been housed in social housing. 39 of these households have at least one child aged under 18, and 42 are single people.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the impact of planning targets on the supply of accommodation, the Portfolio Holder committed to an update on this to the next Housing and Communities O&S Panel, including where the demand for temporary accommodation was coming from.

Second Questions

Question 10

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

Why, and to whom and for what benefit has NFDC outsourced building control?

Reply:

Post Grenfell and the subsequent inquiries, and recommendations, the importance of role of local government building control, in keeping our residents safe in their homes and buildings is paramount.

I was delighted that all the staff in our New Forest building control team met the new requirements placed on them by the Building Safety Act, demonstrating their competence with the required extra accreditations.

I'm sure all members of this chamber will join me in thanking them for their diligence and hard work in achieving this, on top of the day job.

Members will also be interested to note that our own Building Control Manager, Nick Ford has been working nationally to assess competence and accredit surveyors across the country, having himself been one of the first in the country to be accredited under the new competency requirements.

Whilst for many years it has been the case that some elements of building control can be delivered by the private sector, I can give you an absolute assurance that this Council has not outsourced its building control service, nor is it considering doing so.

I would be most interested to know where you heard any information to the contrary, as it seems so out of kilter with the national narrative around building control I have set out.

Note – in response to a supplementary question on the Council's influence over external building control, citing a specific example, the Portfolio Holder welcomed details of the specific incident, of which he would be happy to look into.

Question 11

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

As the Portfolio Holder responsible for our 'partnership agreement' with Freedom Leisure, can he advise what feedback and engagement he undertakes on behalf of the Council, its Residents and Service Users with Freedom?

Reply:

I represent the Council on the Partnership Board. As a board, we meet quarterly and this involves senior employees of Freedom Leisure. At the meeting, key performance indicators are reviewed, including feedback from leisure centre users.

The Portfolio Holder also referenced support for the leisure centre Christmas collections, in support of Southampton's children's ward.