

Council – 14 April 2025 – Questions Under Standing Order 22

First Questions

Question 1

From Cllr Caroline Rackham to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, Cllr Geoffrey Blunden

It is clear that HCC will not contribute to a decent public transport system for our residents. We have a broken ferry service, still no buses direct to the General Hospital and residents across the Forest completely limited in where they can work by a lack of buses. Can the Portfolio Holder tell me exactly why profit from the car parks – which is over a £1 million a year – cannot be used to fund a community health bus, a Calshot bus service and to relaunch the Hythe Ferry?

Reply:

The money generated by the Councils car parks is already accounted for, both covering their operational costs as well as supporting the delivery of a raft of other Council services and operations as part of our balanced budget. I can't help but wonder which of the current services offered by this Council, and so valued by our residents, the Councillor would propose we stop funding or delivering to meet her request? Perhaps it's quite timely that the next question on this agenda item is focused around homelessness, and the recognition of rising costs here; this just one area of many that the Council supports through its balanced budget.

Note: In response to a supplementary question regarding whether any funding could be used from other sources, such as CIL for community transport, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that there was a procedure to be followed for the allocation of CIL funding with an application process and a review of bids received being considered at a member Task and Finish Group. CIL funding had a clear defined use for what it can be used for.

Question 2

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

With Housing and Homelessness cases being an issue that all Ward Cllrs will be dealing with, and the challenges with Housing Families in the Private Sector, due to rising costs among other factors, what can he share

with Cllrs from the recent Landlords forum that could reassure those Families in finding a suitable home which our Housing Officers are supporting, and reduce those having to use emergency accommodation?

Reply:

Thank you for your question. The private rented sector landlords provide a valued and essential supply of homes across the district. Whilst homelessness wasn't discussed at the last forum, at the forum information is shared with landlords to reassure and support them on areas of shared interest.

A Homelessness Prevention Officer is employed by the council, whose role is dedicated to identifying properties, agents and landlords in the private rented sector; liaising with them to build a good working relationship to ensure a good supply of properties to prevent homelessness.

A Homelessness Prevention Support Worker Officer is also employed to liaise with the individual at risk or the landlords to provide a degree of assurance there, to offer sustainable support for anyone at risk of being homeless.

We also have emergency temporary accommodation which we try to avoid, using it for emergency use only. There were temporary accommodation sites, in the District, thought to be 196 in total. 57 units had been created since 2018. These were a holding place for those who had been made homeless. More units were becoming available with 17 more this year, of which 6 were in New Milton, 8 Totton (Salisbury Road), and 3 elsewhere in the district.

It was anticipated that 10-12 more homes would be available in Ringwood and Fordingbridge shortly. It was important to try to avoid any emergency accommodation need by ensuring that more accommodation is available.

Note: In response to a supplementary question about reducing the number of people on the housing waiting list, particularly in the light of LGR and whether more should be done to provide additional temporary accommodation, the Portfolio Holder recognised that it was a challenging situation with no simple answer, but acknowledged that more could be done. He felt that the duty at the current time was to consider ways to support local residents. Around 49% of prevention funding was spent on homelessness, which was a general fund expense. The provision of additional temporary accommodation would reduce these costs.

Question 3

From Cllr Jack Davies to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary

Following this Council's support for the joint submission to government, when will Councillors be told the geographical boundaries of the new unitary authorities?

Reply:

The government's timetable for local government reorganisation is not fixed beyond the deadline of final proposals to be submitted in September 2025.

I believe that the priority ahead remains to protect the distinct identity of the New Forest by looking to form a rural unitary council with mid-Hampshire, preserving the whole of the New Forest District.

Having only recently secured all of the necessary data, KPMG consultants are now modelling a set of options that will be discussed by the leaders of the 15 councils in early May and I will update all Members when I am able to, as I have done throughout this process.

Note: In response to a supplementary question regarding any Government organisation plan which included the New Forest District merging with Southampton, either in full or in part and whether the Leader would formally oppose this and take legal steps to challenge it, the Leader would have to consider if there was any appropriate recourse to challenge any government decision, in the event that an outcome was forced on the Council that was not supported by the community. She would however, work as hard as she could to keep the District as one whole unit and that it was her top priority.

Question 4

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

In regards to LGR discussions, how much is the contribution that this authority is making towards consultants either jointly with others or severally to achieve its' aims of keeping the New Forest together?

Reply:

This Council made a decision to allocate £150,000 into a specific Devolution and LGR reserve. Some of this funding will be needed to contribute towards the jointly commissioned work with KPMG, and we may decide to spend some of this funding on our own commissioned work with consultants. As of yet, neither of these values are confirmed. I have vowed to keep all Councillors informed of our plans and intentions, and this will include the sums committed to spend, when committed to.

Note: In response to a supplementary question about whether the appointment of consultants had gone through procurement processes considering value for money or competitive tendering, the Leader reported that due to the technical nature of the question she would provide a response outside of the meeting.

Question 5

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

The Conservative HCC Administration in Winchester chose to fast track the LGR process pulling in Districts such as our own to the momentum. Pausing for a moment, what assessment has this Council made of how reorganisation might affect local access to services, especially for rural and elderly residents?

Reply:

I would not want to comment on the County Council's apparent enthusiasm for devolution and local government reorganisation. What I do know is clear is that reorganisation alone will not produce the scale of savings that are required to provide financially sustainable services over the medium term.

We strongly believe that the right model for new services delivering adult and children's services is one that is designed around our deep understanding of place. This, alongside our statutory and community based preventative work with local partners will ensure that resources can be allocated more efficiently and meets the needs of our communities.

Question 6

From Cllr Colm McCarthy to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary

We have a number of double hatters or even triple here in this chamber. Are any Officers or Councillors on this Council involved in dual discussions with other authorities that may create conflicts of interest in shaping our position?

Reply:

Currently I am leading on the discussions with the other leaders. As the process develops there will be a need for more input from other members across the council and there will be particular points at which decisions will need to be made. All councillors involved in the debates and decisions from all parties will have to be aware of any conflicts of interest they may have, for example those sitting on the District Council and the County Council will need to decide what approach they are going to take to the decisions within each council.

Officers of the council will be acting further to the direction agreed by members, and I cannot see a position arising where an officer would have a conflict of interest. Officers are aware of their need to consider conflicts generally in the work that they do for the Council.

Question 7

From Cllr Patrick Mballa to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary

What contingency plans exist if the political leadership of this Council is clearly not aligned with the reorganisation plan being developed at county level?

Reply:

At present the council is working in line with the agreed principles which includes modelling a range of different options. As has been made clear it is unlikely that we will all as 15 councils settle on one option.

With council support we are working to deliver a rural-focused unitary authority as the best option for the New Forest area, and one that does not see the district divided. If this is not supported as a model by other councils, we will then consider whether to make our own representations.

Question 8

From Cllr David Harrison to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary

We have only seen vague expressions of intent by the leadership on our website. Wouldn't it be useful for public debate by publishing further information? Will the Council therefore commit to publishing all correspondence with DLUHC or other authorities on this matter in the interests of transparency?

Reply:

I agree that transparency in the process is very important. Initial correspondence with council leaders from MHCLG has been in the public domain and linked to on our website and in the background papers of our decision making report in March.

Data sharing and access to information as local government reorganisation progresses, is something that is being taken up collectively by the leaders and chief executives across Hampshire and the Solent, so that we have a consistent approach across all councils. This will involve the publication of information pro-actively where appropriate, and the protocol for how councils respond to any requests for specific information.

Note: In response to a supplementary question about the unwanted possibility of District Council merging with Southampton and the level of confidence the Leader had to be able to stop it, the Leader reported that she would actively talk with other Leaders as well as Chief Executives to give it her best effort. She was passionate about the forest, recognising it was a unique place and that it should be protected.