

Council – 22 February 2023

Councillor Questions:

1. From Councillor Whybrow to Councillor Monk, Leader of the Council

A large proportion of the emails I receive from local residents relate to problems in the planning system including errors on the planning website; lack of enforcement and a failure to correspond with the applicants for small developments. Data from the Local Government Ombudsman shows that in 2021/22, 6 of the 18 complaints received by the ombudsman about this council related to planning. That suggests that the council must have received an even higher number of complaints about planning. What steps are being taken to improve our service?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question Cllr Whybrow.

In the period highlighted only two of the six complaints were investigated by the Ombudsman and in both cases the Planning Service was found to not be at fault.

In terms of complaints to the Council in the same period, there was a significant drop compared to the previous year, with the number of Stage 1 complaints received reducing from 55 to 26, and Stage 2 complaints from 10 to 7. This reduction in complaints and decisions of the Ombudsman reflect the efforts of the planning teams to improve the service.

Currently in terms of statutory planning application performance, as reported to Government, we have determined 96% of major applications in agreed time against a target of 60%. Our non-major application performance is currently 89% against a target of 70% within agreed time.

In terms of enforcement the Council takes a proportionate approach, assessing each case for the amount of harm and whether enforcement action is expedient.

Since April 2021 the service has received/considered 724 reported breaches of planning. We currently have 128 open cases (compared to over 450 in 2018), have issued 54 Planning Contravention Notices, and taken 7 cases to court for prosecution, of which all have been found in the Council's favour.

The planning service is committed to continuous improvement and feedback is an important part of this. A regular agents forum has been established with those who submit applications to the Council on behalf of others to discuss issues and gain feedback on ways to improve the service. Recently a Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) developers group was established to aid collaborative working with housebuilders who deliver our housing needs across the district.

I am pleased that the planning service is demonstrating improved performance and moving forward this can only be a positive outcome for the district's economy.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

I am pleased to hear that performance is at 89%, but that doesn't match the experience that some people have reported to me. One suggested that perhaps the larger applicants are getting a better service than some of the smaller ones. Can you comment on that?

ANSWER:

We exhibit no known bias between planning applications.

2. From Councillor J Martin to Councillor Monk, Leader of the Council

Following the successful motion by Councillor Tim Prater to abandon the Prince's Parade Development in summer 2019, can Councillor Monk tell me why this successful motion, democratically voted on by the people's representatives at Council was not even considered by Cabinet?

ANSWER:

Thank you Cllr Martin for your question.

The subject matter of the motion to which you refer, is a matter properly reserved for the Executive i.e. Cabinet, in line with our constitution. As cabinet members were present when the motion was considered they would have been fully aware of the sentiments expressed by council at that time, and since summer 2019 various decisions relating to the project have been fully documented with members of cabinet at liberty to raise issues.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Does Councillor Monk regret not referring the decision made at Council to the Cabinet?

ANSWER:

No, I don't in all of the time council have been considering Princes Parade, there was one vote against it, and that was in 2019. All subsequent votes have gone in the favour of Princes Parade.

3. From Councillor Treloar to Councillor Collier, Cabinet Member for Property Management and Grounds Maintenance

Vegetation in the reptile receptor area by the canal was recently flailed by the council. There have been warmer days recently which may have drawn reptiles out, making this work potentially unsafe for the reptiles. Was the

council ecologist consulted before the flailing took place so we can be sure that the risk to wildlife was minimised?

ANSWER:

Thank you Cllr Treloar for your question.

Our Grounds Maintenance team are working closely with, and following advice from the Council's Ecologist Lloyd Bore, to maintain and enhance the receptor sites for the relocated reptiles. Council Officers met with the Ecologist at the end of January and carried out a thorough site walkover and habitat assessment. The Council has received further advice for ongoing maintenance and enhancement of these habitats following this meeting, and future maintenance will be carried out in accordance with this advice.

To confirm, there has been no flail cutting in the location of the reptile receptor sites since the reptiles have been relocated. All cutting has been carried out using handheld trimmers and brushcutters. Advice from the Ecologist included to continue to reduce the alexander and comfrey plants between Twiss Road depot and Cannongate Bridge, and for this section only, to cut to just above ground level to suppress these species and to encourage grass growth in this area. The remainder of the receptor site area is to be cut to a minimum of 20cm.

As part of our ongoing habitat enhancement, the Council is looking to install an additional 4 hibernaculas this year to provide additional habitats for the reptiles.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Can you reassure me that we will bear in mind the changeability in weather as our set ecological management plan in those areas?

ANSWER:

We have obviously liaised with the council's ecologist, the grounds maintenance team. They obviously have undertaken all representations and ideas and suggestions that the ecologist has come up with. I don't think there is any reason to change that, but I'm sure we will make sure they are aware of not causing any damage to the wildlife.

4. From Councillor Meade to Councillor Wimble, Cabinet Member for the District Economy

As the place plan regarding the town Centre has now received positive feedback from levelling up funding, can you please confirm that there will still be room for the Folkestone market, and if indeed there are plans to expand what could indeed be a very good visitors market if expanded?

ANSWER:

Thank you Cllr Meade for your question.

We are delighted to have received positive news regarding our Levelling up Fund application for Folkestone. In terms of the Folkestone Market this is an important ingredient to creating a vibrant town centre and therefore will be very much form part of the project's infrastructure improvement programme within Sandgate Road and Guildhall Street. Further detail will emerge as the project is developed with engagement opportunities for local people.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Please can you ensure consideration to dedicated parking for market traders is included in these plans?

ANSWER:

I am aware of these issues. I'm sure the officers will take that on board and work with the consultation to come up with a solution.

5. From Councillor Meade to Councillor Mrs Hollingbee, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Communities

Following on from a previous question some time ago, KCC have now confirmed a cut of £4 million in the budget that supports such services as Porchlight and indeed are expecting the District councils to provide the plans and funding for this. Now that the cuts have been passed can you now confirm that there will be funding within the District budget to continue this vital service for the homeless and that plans for the transition of this service between KCC and District are now in place ?

ANSWER:

Thank you Cllr Meade for your question.

The Council's Housing Options Team have been holding regular monthly discussions with KCC as they wind down the former Kent Wide Homeless Connect Service, including working on the transitional funding arrangements, which KCC has now put in place.

In addition, the Council and other Kent Authorities have been working with KCC colleagues, to assist with their (KCC) bid for Central Government funding, aimed at providing support for clients experiencing homelessness, due to drug and other substances misuse issues. I understand this bid has been successful and is expected to bring in £1.5m of further funding across the county.

We have also been meeting specifically with Porchlight, who are working on their future service delivery proposals for their supported accommodation provision in the district.

The Council and its local partners continue to deliver services as part of the Rough Sleeping Initiative, working to identify people who are or who are at risk of rough sleeping in the district, helping them to access long-term accommodation and support services. Porchlight is a key member of the local partnership, which also works to identify the need for future provision in the district and to explore all available funding opportunities to support services. Our outreach services are currently assisting 6 people who have been confirmed as rough sleeping in the district. The service is working to monitor the welfare of the individuals and to encourage them to access accommodation and any supports services they require.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

I know we are looking after 6 people, but I believe there are many 'invisible' people who are homeless. What other local agencies are we working with to ensure that those who are 'invisible' are not going to end up on our streets and will get the support that they need?

ANSWER:

Can I just say that our outreach team are out in the district all the time checking to see if people are out overnight. We work with a whole range of partners and voluntary agencies, ie Rainbow Centre, Porchlight, NHS. We will certainly do our best. I would also like to congratulate our team for the work they do in finding and working with those people who are struggling on the streets.

6. From Councillor Keen to Councillor Field, Cabinet Member for Transport and Digital Transformation

Can you please explain why the CPZ has been increased from £35.00 last year to £38.50 this year and why do you feel that this increase is appropriate when Folkestone Residents already pay one of the highest Council Taxes in Kent and during a period of high inflation.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Cllr Keen.

The council has a proud record of keeping resident permit charges low. Our resident permit charge is one of the lowest in the County, with many districts charging 2-3 times more. The council is facing significant increases in the costs of maintaining and operating CPZs. The proposed permit price increase is in line with inflationary increases to other fees and charges across the wider council.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Can you tell me how much of the CPZ revenue is paid to KCC?

ANSWER:

Your comments have been noted, and a response will be given to you.

Following the meeting, the response below was provided:

Thank you for your supplementary question, Cllr Keen. We have not paid any revenue to KCC. Our current agreement with KCC states that if the surplus in any Financial Year exceeds an Agreed Sum of £100k, then any balance above this sum may only be spent by the District after obtaining the approval of the KCC Director. Over the past 4 years, on-street parking has had a net cost to the district, and in the 2 years prior, there has been a small surplus- well below the £100k. A breakdown of the parking accounts is attached (appendix 1).

7. From Councillor Keen to Councillor Collier, Cabinet Member for Property Management and Grounds Maintenance

Could we please have an a breakdown as to why there has been such a massive leap in the lease charges in FHDC beach huts coupled with a 5% increase each year over the next four years.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question Cllr Keen.

The Charity made a substantial investment in the beach huts and surrounding infrastructure in order to regenerate the area and provide an additional net revenue stream to the Charity therefore the rent policy needs to fully reflect this. This income contributes to the maintenance and upkeep of all of the Charity's assets. It was therefore recommended and agreed that a commercial method of setting rents for lease agreements is used, whereby a review of the market and comparable evidence is undertaken at the time at which lease terms are agreed.

This exercise has been completed for the future beach hut leases commencing in 2023, where the rents have been reviewed in line with the market and set at levels comparable to other local authorities' beach huts. The evidence researched by an independently appointed surveyor supported an increase in the rents to £1,600pa inclusive of VAT for large huts; and £1,200pa inclusive of VAT for small huts. Rent increases throughout the lease term were recommended to account for inflation and enable the Charity to benefit from guaranteed fixed rental uplifts. Current rental rates are £1,236pa and £978.50pa for the large and small huts respectively. These rents are VAT inclusive and the council apportions the VAT due from the amounts paid by the tenants.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

With high increases in beach huts, the majority of which are wooden, can you give reassurance that some form of running water, and working toilets will be provided?

ANSWER:

Caveat emptor let the buyer beware. We have a waiting list of 700. We have had very few, if any, actually give up their beach huts, except in extraordinary circumstances. If we were to provide extra facilities there would be considerable costs, one of the results of which would be a substantial increase in the rents payable, and I would suggest that the waiting list would more than double.

8. From Councillor Keen to Councillor Monk, Leader of the Council

In November 2022 I asked the leader how many agency staff FHDC were employing. I was informed that there were 11 members of temporary staff employed. If we employed 11 members of staff could we please have an explanation and breakdown of cost on how 11 staff cost FHDC a total of £155,769.87.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question Cllr Keen.

I can confirm that there were in fact 11 temporary member of staff engaged by the council in November as I previously advised you. In terms of the costs you refer to, I am pleased to advise you that the council reports all of its costs and budget variances as part of the quarterly general fund budget monitoring reports which are regularly received by Cabinet and are available to all members of the council and the public.

The last Quarter 3 monitoring report was received by Cabinet on 25 January 2023 and this clearly identified in Appendix A, where there were any significant spends or variances that related to temporary staff costs across council departments. I would refer you to this report for reference. I would also point out that the Council is forecasting an underspend of £567,000 after allowing for costs such as these alongside a number of prudent cost saving measures.

Can I also advise you that this report helpfully identifies where any such costs, for temporary support costs are funded by way of compensatory grant or from approved reserves, which is often the case. One such example being the cost of the temporary staff support costs for climate change work which have been funded from an approved climate change reserve.

It is important for you to note Cllr Keen that temporary staff costs include not only agency staff costs (to cover peak time or seasonal work) , but also interim support staff costs which are part funded by vacant posts plus staff costs to cover specialist work functions, such as climate change or special

projects which are funded by other revenue streams such as government grant.

The council will be reporting its revenue outturn position for the full 2022/23 financial year in April and this will also include a list of key variances and full details of any over or underspends that relate to temporary support costs.

There was no supplementary question.

9. From Councillor Keen to Councillor Monk, Leader of the Council

Earlier this week I read in the press that Princes Parade will very likely be sold off to a development company and that the Swimming Pool/ Leisure Centre that was planned as part of the Councils Prince`s Parade Development would still be by the developer. If this is the case can we be assured that the complex will be open to the general public and be affordable for local wage earners to use?

ANSWER:

Thank you Cllr Keen for your question.

Officers are currently working to deliver the last approved decision on the Princes Parade scheme which is to do the necessary work to implement the planning permission.

An offer has been made by a developer for the outright purchase of the whole site to include building of the leisure centre and associated infrastructure and a paper was considered earlier this evening at Cabinet.

Cabinet agreed to note the offer, and instruct officers to consider the matter and potential next steps.

As officers move forward with this, they will ensure open access to this leisure facility with a widened promenade, and to the new accessible open space and parkland, and to the new homes, for all residents of the district to enjoy.

There was no supplementary question.

10. From Councillor Davison to Councillor Mrs Hollingsbee, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Communities

What steps is the council taking to work with the police and others to ensure we protect everyone in our community from the type of horrendous incident we saw in Knowsley outside a hotel being used to house people seeking refuge, earlier this month?

ANSWER:

Thank you Cllr Davison for your question.

The Council works with all key partners to ensure safety and security at both the two UASC hotels, the adult asylum hotel and Napier Barracks is paramount. These partners include F&HDC Community Safety Team, Kent Police, Southeast Migration, Prevent and an assigned Police Officer for both Napier and UASC Hotels.

There are regular multi agency meetings with several key partners in attendance for Napier as well as UASC Hotels. They include Kent Police, Prevent/Counter Terrorism colleagues, site officials and Home Office Colleagues amongst others to assess all risks. The groups receive and regularly exchange any intelligence (national, regional, and local) and formulate responses to any given situation. The Prevent team working alongside Kent Police share all relevant intel when known and this includes information shared through online tensions monitoring as well as with local and national activists. Alongside this, any issues are shared back to the Prevent team through F&HDC CSU which is recorded and shared to the Home Office Disruption team.

Full training is given to security staff and reassurance is given on the level of security (including any stepping up needed). This could include additional police patrols / presence within the community. Staff at the sites are alerted to the types of threat that they need to be aware of and information circulated if needed. This includes both online threats as well as likelihood of site visits etc. Napier Barracks and UASC hotels are a priority area for the Prevent Team and regular training is delivered by Prevent to Napier barracks staff. For awareness, a recent training session has also been delivered to F&HDC CSU group and partners.

Prevent Community Engagement Officer and Prevent Education Officer engage within our local community. Their work includes inputs into the community and to local schools as this helps to decrease community tensions and provide reassurance and a level of understanding.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

I've been asked by residents what the plan would be if there was intelligence of an incident, like we have seen elsewhere. As a ward member, would you be able to offer a more specific detailed briefing on how this would be dealt with?

ANSWER:

This is difficult to answer, but I will pass your request on to senior officers and the Police.

Schedule 2

Appendix one – supplementary response to Q6

On-Street Parking			
	£	£	
2015/16			
Income			556835.03
Expenditure	303892.51		
Depreciation & impairment costs	26169.34		
Support Services	308427.75	638489.6	
Net Expenditure			81655
2016/17			
Income			670050.89
Expenditure	373208.73		
Depreciation & impairment costs	8007.01		
Management Administration & Support Services	251073.05	632288.79	
Net Income			37762
2017/18			
Income			620882.31
Expenditure	333386.75		
Depreciation & impairment costs	0		
Management Administration & Support Services	273670	607056.75	
Net Income			13826
2018/19			
Income			729501.66
Expenditure	387911.23		
Deptn & Impairment Costs	8476.3		
Management Admin & Support Services	409250	805637.53	
Net Expenditure			76136
2019/20			
Income			714664.65
Expenditure	456079.31		
Deptn & Impairment Costs	9117.84		
Management Admin & Support Services	421300	886497.15	
Net Expenditure			171833
2020/21			
Income			656134.94
Expenditure	381254.56		
Deptn & Impairment Costs	9117.84		
Management Admin & Support Services	485389.82	875762.22	
Net Expenditure			219627.28
2021/22			
Income			-861072.4
Expenditure	512144.05		
Deptn & Impairment Costs	9917.84		
Management Admin & Support Services	424880	946941.89	
Net Expenditure			85869.45

Off-Street Parking			
	£	£	
2015/16			
Income			-1131479
Expenditure	218166.7		
Depreciation & impairment costs	26649.98		
Support Services	428722.7	673539.41	
Net Income			457940
2016/17			
Income			1229205.2
Expenditure	240990.3		
Depreciation & impairment costs	23944.44		
Management Administration & Support Services	353294.4	618229.09	
Net Income			610976
2017/18			
Income			263411.97
Expenditure	230968		
Depreciation & impairment costs	23944.44		
Management Administration & Support Services	367400	622312.46	
Net Income			641100
2018/19			
Income			1440219.5
Expenditure	208964.9		
Deptn & Impairment Costs	27574.44		
Management Admin & Support Services	433530	670069.38	
Net Income			770150
2019/20			
Income			1408943.4
Expenditure	242440.2		
Deptn & Impairment Costs	160150		
Management Admin & Support Services	556310	958900.15	
Net Income			450043
2020/21			
Income			1043070.3
Less Expenditure	251966.8		
Depn & Impairment Costs	58916		
Management Admin & Support Services	521799.5	832682.3	
Net Expenditure			210387.97
2021/22			
Income			-1539992
Less Expenditure	352479.2		
Depn & Impairment Costs	55457.71		
Management Admin & Support Services	523300	931236.87	
Net Expenditure			608754.96