

Council – 24 January 2024

Councillor Questions:

1. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Speakman, Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations

The paper C/23/68 presented at the December Cabinet meeting, proposed changes to the number of litter bins serviced by Veolia, as part of the street cleaning contract. I fully support the need for the Council to achieve savings to address the gap in the budget that currently exists. The proposal shows that savings can be achieved by cutting the number of bins across the District from 1060 to 775 (a reduction of 285 bins). What criteria is going to be used to ascertain which bins will be removed and do Veolia have accurate data to support the removal of the least used bins?

ANSWER:

Thank you for the question.

Firstly, I think it important to say that whilst the original recommendation did include a targeted reduction in the overall number of litter bins linked to a savings target; when this was discussed by cabinet the final recommendation was changed to remove a target figure. This was to allow for any rationalisation in litter bin numbers and locations to be driven primarily by demand rather than an imperative to achieve a financial savings target. It is agreed however that there needs to be a rationalisation in overall numbers to put a cap on costs and to ensure that the council can keep its litter bin stock in a good state of repair. No criteria for removal or relocation have yet been agreed and there are limitations on the data available on bin use, which will need to be considered.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

Please can the Cabinet Member confirm that all Town and Parish Councils will be consulted on which bins are to be removed from their Wards, prior to the bins being removed. Can the Cabinet Member also confirm that organisations, such as Litter Picking Watch Romney Marsh (who do such a fantastic job keeping the District litter free) will be allowed to support the Town/Parish Councils and have an input into the final bin locations.

ANSWER:

There will need to be engagement with Ward Members as well as Town and Parish Councils on what is proposed. I expect Town and Parishes may well want to draw on the experiences of local community litter picking groups but that will be their decision.

2. From Councillor Goddard to Councillor Speakman, Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations

Would the cabinet Member agree with me that the work of the Area Officers has been transformational in ensuring that incidents of graffiti, especially obscene and racist graffiti have been removed promptly and that their support has been crucial in supporting volunteer groups across the district in litter picking securing many hundreds of hours of volunteering and would he assure me and the council that this team will not be a casualty in the forthcoming budget proposals?

ANSWER:

Thank you, Councillor Goddard for your question.

Matters relating to staffing and the staffing structure are the responsibility of the Head of Paid Service. It is my understanding that reductions to the Area Officer Team have been proposed, moving from four to two officers with one voluntary redundancy.

I certainly agree that the work of the Area Officers has been transformational to the district and the proposed retention of two officers to continue with this important work is welcomed.

As all councillors are aware the council is in a difficult financial position and hard decisions have needed to be taken. Wherever possible the impacts on frontline and statutory services have been minimised.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

None.

3. From Councillor Wimble to Councillor J Martin, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

In light of the council's current budget constraints, which have led to the unfortunate necessity of laying off staff and possibly making substantial service cuts, I'm left wondering about the wisdom behind a particular decision. Specifically, is it a judicious use of taxpayers' money to dismantle a perfectly functional fence that once encircled a site you and your party deemed 'so hazardous it was a matter of life and death', only to replace it with a smaller one? Rather than allocating a budget ranging from a quarter to half a million pounds for this endeavour, I believe it would be more fiscally responsible to explore a more economical approach. I recall suggesting prior to the election that we consider a district-wide referendum. This approach would allow for a more democratic and informed decision-making process that takes into account the concerns and preferences of our constituents.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question Councillor Wimble. There is a lot to answer so please bear with me as I address each point in turn:

It is true this Council, like so many Councils up and down the Country are having to deal with a deficit. To try and present to this chamber a balanced budget next month is still a challenge, but I can report that we have made great strides towards a balanced position. This has only been done by a great deal of work by almost every department in the Council, yes cuts have been made and jobs, very sadly, have been lost but I promised the people of the District that our Council would not be one of the many Council's declaring bankruptcy and I can confirm tonight, that I will keep my promise.

With regard to the hoardings around Prince's Parade, I am sorry that progress has been slow, but this site is complex and as the last administration found to their cost, it cannot be dealt with lightly. To re-fence the site we first needed specialist analysis of the site, ground conditions and most importantly the contaminants present within the top 0.5m of soil. We were then given advice, from the specialist on how to proceed.

The works have now been tendered and works will begin shortly to replace the hoardings at a works cost of between £50k and £160k dependent on the type of fencing chosen, and also includes budget for both ecological and archaeological watching briefs to ensure our wildlife and heritage on the site is continued to be protected. You will note that this figure is nowhere close to the "half a million" speculated in your question and I am sure you will join with me in congratulating the officers in achieving value for money.

There has been much speculation on social media regarding the existing hoardings and the 1300+ concrete blocks that support them. I am able to confirm this evening that all of the hoardings are being recycled up to Otterpool where they will be utilised to hoard existing vacant buildings, and any materials left over, will be stored and used on site as construction works progress in the future.

I know Councillor Wimble is concerned about costs, so I think he will agree with me, that the cost to this Council of running a District wide referendum to decide the fate of some hoardings would not be a judicious use of taxpayers' money.

Later this year I hope to begin a consultation on the future of Prince's Parade, where local people will be consulted and asked to give their thoughts, ideas and suggestion with regard to the future use of this much-loved section of our coastline.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

None.

4. From Councillor Wimble to Councillor J Martin, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

To avoid any speculation and to allow the whole district residents who actually pay council tax to have a say, could a district wide referendum be held over the

proposed swimming pool as to where it should be eventually positioned as it appears that a minority councils decisions will impact the whole district?

ANSWER:

Thank you, Councillor Wimble, for your question. Before the decision was taken to build a swimming pool at Prince's Parade, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered three locations: The Green in Hythe, Martello Lakes and Prince's Parade. The Green was rejected because of a legal impediment, Prince's Parade was rejected because of the financial risk and proposed Martello Lakes as the most deliverable option. Sadly, the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was ignored but the site at Martello Lakes is still available for £1.

I am very happy for people to speculate all they wish, indeed I would ask anyone with ideas, suggestions or opinions to write to me and share their views. Two people have come to see me with different ideas for the location of the swimming pool. Currently I have a very open mind on location.

The key area for speculation currently is, can we ever afford to build a swimming pool? We have had to cut almost all areas of Council services this year, and unless someone knows something I don't, next year will also be tough. No responsible Council, be that a majority or a minority administration will commit local people's money to a new swimming pool while cutting Council's services elsewhere.

If we arrive at a point where we are able to afford a new swimming pool to replace the swimming pool in South Rd Hythe, there will be extensive consultation regarding its location.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

If something were to happen to the Hythe pool which was passed its design date, are you confirming that there would be no pool in Hythe?

ANSWER:

The South Road swimming pool is one I am familiar with and the end has been predicted for many years. It was clear that there were many elements, such as the building fabric, the condensers on the heating system, that could be quite appropriately described as 'on their last legs'. However, we will take this as it comes, and continue to maintain the pool. The swimming pool staff are among the most committed we employ, and I hope that we will be able to continue with the South Road swimming pool until the new pool is built. However, if something happened to the south road pool, and we were not in a position to have built the new pool in time, then we would be without a pool in Hythe until the new one is built.

5. From Councillor Godfrey to Councillor J Martin, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

As you vigorously fought against the development of a Leisure Centre including up to 150 units at Princes Parade (East) on part brownfield and a landfill site, will you be taking the same stance against the loss of the golf course and its redevelopment into a lakeside holiday destination at Princes Parade (West)?

ANSWER:

Thank you, Councillor Godfrey, for your question and you are quite right: I am hopelessly predetermined!

I first joined the Save Prince's Parade campaign in 2012 when I walked into the first meeting and told the group it was "all about the viability"! I have often reflected how different the last 12 years of my life might have been, if I had not walked into that meeting? I now find myself, however, in a very different position, compared to 2012 and my stance will reflect my current position but hopefully not reduce my vigour!

SUPPLEMENTARY:

None.

6. From Councillor Mrs Hollingsbee to Councillor Fuller, Cabinet Member for Resident Engagement and Accountability

I was very disappointed to see the Customer Service Excellence signs removed in the Civic Centre and on the website. In 2022 the assessor from the Centre for Assessment visited the District to carry out a comprehensive assessment and the Council was again awarded the Certificate of Customer Service Excellence. We were also successful in being awarded Compliance Plus in 16 categories. This was something the staff could rightly be extremely proud of and residents recognised. Can the Cabinet Member tell us how much money has been saved by not renewing the customer Excellence programme?

ANSWER:

Thanks for your question Councillor Mrs Hollingsbee.

Providing excellent customer service is something of which our staff are rightly proud. I am sure you, and all Councillors, will join with me in thanking our staff for their commitment to providing the very best services for our customers across the district. This is of course against a backdrop of financial challenges and the significant transformational change the Council is currently going through.

A cost saving of circa £5,000 will be made by not pursuing the award this year, but cost is not the main reason for this. Planning and delivering the work required to support a CSE assessment is a very significant draw on staff time from across

all services and it is important to recognise that this is in addition to regular work activities.

We have listened to our staff who have voiced concerns over increasing work pressures and taken the view that their focus should be firmly placed on delivering front line services and priorities. Unfortunately, this means that activities like CSE may not continue. However, I can say that we will shortly be refreshing the Council's Customer Access Strategy and this will include benchmarking of our services and improving the use of customer feedback. This will ensure that we maintain a focus on the key theme of continuous improvement as we strive to continue to deliver the best outcomes for our staff and customers.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

£5k was a small amount to recognise customer service excellence and for staff to be respected, would you reconsider the decision?

ANSWER:

£5k cost was the headline figure, it pales in comparison to the amount of work time involved, but obviously I can speak to officers and get back to you with a response.

7. From Councillor Cooper to Councillor P Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Transport, Regulatory Services and Building Control

Could you please explain why the process of fixing some of the district owned streetlights within the Romney Marsh Ward, seem to take forever to either switch on, fix and/or upgrade before being transferred to Kent County Council for adoption. In so doing, would you please give an update on the progress of the work to date within the Romney Marsh Ward on said streetlights as per Report number: C/21/44 before the Cabinet in November 2021 including, how many district owned streetlights are there within my Ward, and how many of those have been upgraded. How many of them are waiting to be switched on, and how many have been adopted by Kent County Council. In addition to, what is the number of district owned streetlights within the Romney Marsh Ward awaiting adoption. More importantly, by what date, can the residents of the Romney Marsh Ward expect said streetlights to be either switched on, upgraded, and adopted as the case maybe.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Cllr Cooper.

Our records show there are 70 district owned assets within the Romney Marsh ward. These assets do not meet KCC's criteria for adoption so they will continue to be maintained by FHDC.

Out of the 70 Romney Marsh assets, works on 68 are now fully completed. The remaining two, which are in Church Approach (NCOJ001) and Newchurch Lane

(NUCC002A) require UKPN works. The costs for works on assets that require UKPN connections have been much higher than originally budgeted, so officers will soon be making a case for additional funding for these two Romney Marsh assets, plus another 54 assets across the district that require UKPN connections. If the extra funding is agreed, the entire project is expected to be fully completed by the end of April 2024.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

There is at least one unit on the Sands estate (I will provide the asset number), where an 81 year old lady is scared to leave her home because it is unlit, and she is frightened of tripping. I have received an email from a member of staff who said this is being looked into, but could you check this? Can we also ensure that actual work is being done by the sub-contractors?

ANSWER:

Yes, if you can give me the location details of that asset, we will look into that. I will also look at where we are with the overall project, costs and so on, but I'm confident as I can be that it is all running as planned.

8. From Councillor Cooper to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

Yet again the District is sadly coming in for unnecessary criticism due to the classification of the quality of the Bathing Water around St Marys Bay and now Littlestone. I am advised the problems are being caused by a combination of agricultural waste washing off of the Marsh and leakage from domestic waste services from individual properties. The Environment Agency have determined this from the tests they have done. I understand they are now working on locating the sources of the problem, and when they have done this they will seek to take action against the property and land owners where the problems are occurring.

Will this council please write to Philip Duffy and Sarah Chare the Chief Executive and Executive Director of Local Operations of the Environment Agency to ask why is it taking so long to remedy this problem and when can residents and visitors expect it to be fixed? Could a copy of that letter also be sent to the Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP, Minister of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pointing out the apparent inertness of the EA is causing a lot of untold concern regarding the existing and future quality testing of the sea water?

ANSWER:

Thank you, Cllr Cooper, for the question.

I share completely your concerns about the beach water classifications at St Mary's Bay and Littlestone. Indeed I am very concerned about the reduction in bathing water quality at almost all testing points along our coast.

I have been meeting regularly with other local authorities across the region, organised by the Environment Agency to apply pressure to Ofwat, the Water Regulator to fine Southern Water for persistently failing to meet their customer's needs. I signed a joint letter from a group of 20 plus District Councils, addressed to Ofwat asking for them to take action against Southern Water.

This is a much bigger problem than a few localised failures, I intend to involve the Environment Agency, and Central Government in these discussions and your question is a very helpful prompt.

Locally, our Environmental Protection Team have also been meeting with Southern Water and the Environment Agency to review the latest technical data and progress being made. I plan to meet Southern Water at beginning of next month to push again for improvements.

I agree that the Environment Agency as the regulatory body has a critical role to play in this matter. There has already been correspondence with all the main parties involved and I am happy to support a letter being sent on behalf of the council to the Environment Agency and minister.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

None, but Councillor Cooper asked to see a copy of the response.

9. From Councillor Meade to Councillor M Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration

It is quite some time since this council voted to create a Youth Council to allow the youngsters of the District to input into decisions that will affect their future. Can you please give an update as to when this may start?

ANSWER:

The motion to full council was that the council should refer to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee a report on establishing a district-based youth council, invite representatives to offer their views and survey young people on their support for a youth council.

Officers have been speaking to colleagues in the county council and district councils about their youth councils and youth forums, the different models for these bodies and the potential implications for financial and staff resources. A report is being prepared for February's Overview and Scrutiny Committee setting out how the council could respond to the points in the council resolution.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

None.

10. **From Councillor Meade to Councillor M Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration**

The Council released a press release regarding Grace Hill library this month, but it had little to no information and detail regarding the Grade 2 listed building. Can you please confirm whether the building will be reinstated as a library, arts and community hub or have the people of Folkestone lost a building that was built and bequeathed to them as a library?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your excellent question Councillor Meade.

I have taken a personal interest in saving this building, as has the Leader who have met with Roger Gough the Leader of KCC to discuss the Grace Hill Library specifically. My The discussions with the leadership of Kent County Council have been very positive regarding a community based, partnership approach which would secure a positive future for Grace Hill Library.

Can I just take this opportunity to praise the hard work carried out by Creative Folkestone to secure a future for the building.

Indeed, I am confident that everyone involved is working hard to achieve a future for Grace Hill Library, although it is a complex project and will take time to work through all the detail. Whilst I recognise that local people are very keen to know the detail of any proposals, unfortunately there isn't anything to update on just yet, further to the recent announcement. When there is more to say, I can assure you that Kent County Council and the partners will be keen to ensure that the community is kept up to speed on this significant project for Folkestone.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

The Grace Hill Library was built on the boundary of three wards. It was specifically built as a Library for some our most deprived. I as a KCC Councillor managed to raise some funding via Kent County about 3 years ago, £300,000 was used to refurbish the library. Can I ask that you keep the ward members involved in this? The demonstrations that happened show that people want this as their library. We have always been told that this closure was temporary.

ANSWER:

Absolutely, I'd be very happy to keep you in the loop and will share any news as soon as I have it.

11. **From Councillor Meade to Councillor Speakman, Cabinet Member for Assets and Operations**

As a KCC councillor I have been very keen to organise proper accessibility for wheelchair and mobility scooter users onto Sunny Sands Beach. At present, although there is a concrete ramp down to the sand, the sand is so fine it makes it nearly impossible for residents and visitors to move through the sand to the seashore in wheelchairs or scooters. I have set aside £10k from my community grant to work in conjunction with District council, who control Sunny Sands, to make this possible - whether with a mobi mat (which I'm being told is not possible due to the tides) or a wooden / plastic boardwalk. I know the leader is positive about this project, but I am being told that there is no officer resource to do the necessary Safety checks etc. to take this vital piece of equipment forward. This would make a huge difference to our mobility impaired and visual impaired residents, visitors and their families and allow them to enjoy our beach fully with their families, which is only right. Can the Cabinet Member please confirm that officer resource will be found to work with me to make this happen if at all possible?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question Councillor Meade, and I fully appreciate your intent. Whilst this is not in the corporate plan and there is currently no resource allocated to this, officers have previously liaised with Chris Cox from Cinque Ports Mobility who are local specialists in this area. Chris explained that due to the nature of FHDC beaches being either shingle with steep drop offs, or very tidal i.e. sand will be completely covered by the tide and quickly cover access items such as Mobi Matts, solutions are not easy to find.

One suggestion that came out of the conversations was the possibility of procuring a beach wheelchair. These have large wheels for access across the beach and float when they enter the water. Cinque Ports Mobility would be able to borrow one of these to carry out a trial if a suitable volunteer group could be identified to assist with this. Another suggestion might be for conversations to take place with Folkestone Rescue who operate on a volunteer basis providing rescue services at Sunny Sands in the summer. They may be able to operate the wheelchair and find a suitable location for storage.

FHDC does not have officer resource to pursue this, however this could be factored into the new Corporate Plan.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

I believe there are solutions to this problem. Obviously the council has started to talk. One wheelchair will not make the difference. Can we arrange a meeting to sit down and discuss ideas to make this happen for residents?

ANSWER:

Happy to do so at your earliest convenience.

12. From Councillor Cooper to Councillor Shoob, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness

What is the current level of rent arrears owed by tenants? I am asking due to the Household Support Fund closing in March, the energy price cap increasing by at least £94 this month and given some council tenants are some of the financially challenged. This cold weather spell will affect a lot of hard pressed people who are going to have to spend more of their fixed and limited incomes on heating their homes this winter.

Private rents are also expected to increase by about 5% during 2024. The Consumer Prices Index including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH) rose by 4.2% in the 12 months to December 2023.

Given inflation is currently now at 4.2 % does the council feel it's wise to be increasing rents by a further 7.7% in April on asking its tenants for an over inflation increase especially given the state of disrepair of some of its housing stock currently, and the level of its arrears could put more people into debt, and/or further debt. Not to mention at risk of losing their home.

ANSWER:

Thank you Councillor Cooper for your question.

As at 22/01/24 the current level of rent arrears owed by tenants is: **£439,520.47**. Whilst I appreciate that this is a difficult financial climate for everyone and recognise the need to continue to offer support and focus on tenancy sustainment, that is to say making sure that tenants can stay in their homes, the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is currently under significant pressure to deliver against the key priorities agreed by Members:

- **Compliance** - Tenant Health & Safety and wellbeing – the revised HRA Business Plan signed off by Cabinet in December 23 commits - **£38M** capital investment over 30 years
- **Housing management**, repairs and ongoing maintenance – (**£317M** revenue expenditure; **£187M** over 30 years on repairs & maintenance of homes)
- **Decent Homes** - investment and capital Improvements to our stock – (**£166M**)
- **Decarbonisation** – Retrofitting existing homes – (**£44M** of capital investment)
- **Acquisitions and New Build contributing to affordable homes** – **£126M** capital investment over an 18 year period to deliver up to 360 new affordable

homes, (followed by investing a further £14M in them in capital maintenance over time.)

We cannot achieve this without collecting all the rent and service charge income due to the HRA.

Each year on 1st April, social housing rents and service charges are set by the Regulator of Social Housing's formula, CPI + 1% in line with government Rent Policy. This is based on the previous September's CPI, which in September 2023 was 6.7%. Therefore the recommended level for 24/25 equates to 7.7%. This should be viewed in the context of an historical low level of rental income to the HRA for many years prior to last year. From April 2016, the Welfare Reform and Work Act required social landlords to **reduce their rents by 1%** each year for four years.

Following that in 2020/2021 CPI + 1% resulted in 2.71% rent increase. This gave the council housing service a gross rental income £15,040,000.

For the subsequent years, the CPI + 1% formula resulted in the following annual rental income for the council:

2021/2022 - 1.5% increase giving rental Income £15,283,000
2022/2023 - 4.1% increase giving rental Income £15,974,000
Last year 2023/2024 the increase was capped at 7% giving rental Income £16,288,000

This coming year 2024/2025 CPI + 1% = 7.7% which will be a gross rental Income of £17,833,000.

The rent increase will be covered by the DWP for those in receipt of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit and it will go some way towards redressing the lack on investment in our housing stock over previous years, which was alluded to in your question.

Our Housing Income and Welfare team are on hand and committed to working with any tenants who are worried about debt or experiencing financial difficulties. They can be contacted by email **housing.income@folkestone-hythe.org.uk** or phone **01303 853300**.

Our council welfare team can help with rent arrears, claiming benefits and budgeting advice. If tenants are in receipt of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit, they may be able to apply for Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) to help with their rent. If they receive Council Tax Reduction and are facing exceptional hardship, they may be able to get Financial Support Payments (FSP). These can both be applied for, as can Council Tax Reduction, via the council website online application form.

We can also refer tenants to mobile food service and Community hubs that provide support, including food and warm spaces.

SUPPLEMENTARY:

What is the council going to be doing regarding the uplift of either the cost of heating or the 10% - whichever is greater?

ANSWER:

I share your concerns about anyone facing increased prices, be it rent, energy, everything is going up. As I said, cost affects some people more than others. I am mindful also of people on our council register who are currently paying far higher rates in the private sector. I would reiterate that for our tenants, if they are experiencing difficulties, please get in touch with the welfare team who will do their best to help.

13. From Councillor Walker to Councillor Jim Martin, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

It is good to see mention of the ongoing problems with local bus routes in both the leader's and Cllr. Blakemore's reports. There was a further public meeting attended by Joel Mitchell last week where residents once again spoke of the frustration caused by the reduction in, and unreliability of services. Broadmead residents have no service at all at weekends leaving them unable to get into town for local services or local supermarkets if they do not have access to a car.

Given that this council would support a reduction in the use of the private car and the promotion of more sustainable transport and recognising that not all residents are capable of riding a bike or walking long distances, will Cllr Martin be able to reassure us that talks will continue and pressure will be maintained and that this council will work hard to ensure that some services are restored?

ANSWER:

Thank you Councillor Walker for your question and I very much appreciate the concerns raised by residents in relation to bus services.

The short answer to you, and residents, is yes. I can categorically say that this Council will continue to engage with bus companies, Kent County Council, government and all other parties involved to champion the need for better bus services across our district.

I think it is worth pointing out that FHDC have no control, no authority or influence over the bus services. Stagecoach are a private business that operates and is subsidised by KCC. We can only persuade, cajole and encourage.

Through discussions to date between ourselves and Stagecoach, I know that there is a willingness to work together positively to address this issue, which

will not only achieve improved sustainability outcomes but will also support equality and fairness for all residents.

As the 45 minute time limit expired, there was no supplementary question for question 13. The questions below were therefore not read out at the meeting, but written responses were provided.

14. From Councillor Keen to Councillor P Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Transport, Regulatory Services and Building Control

During the last council administration, I asked if something could be done to save the White Lion Public House in Cheriton before it deteriorated any further. I was told that there was nothing that could be done as the owners had plans for the site. Later a motion was put to full council by Cllr Peter Gane asking that FHDC make a compulsory purchase of the building as nothing had been done to the building and it was deteriorating at speed the motion however fell. Therefore I would like to know why a 215 has only just been placed on the building now and why this was not done before the building got into the state it's in now and not between 2019 and 2023?

ANSWER:

That's a really good question Councillor Keen and one that I wanted answered when I was elected as a ward councillor for Cheriton last May and subsequently became Portfolio Holder for Regulatory Services.

The issue of the deteriorating state of the White Lion had come up repeatedly on the doorstep. When Cllr Shoob, Cllr Mike Blakemore and I were elected last year, it was our top priority to do all that we could to ensure that the building was restored to its former glory and brought back into use.

The owners of the building had previously intimated that they would be progressing with plans to implement their planning permission which would have addressed the issues affecting the building. The period agreed with the owners for implementing the permission expired last year and, given the lack of action taken by the owners to bring the site back into good repair, the Council issued an untidy site notice on 11th October 2023. The Notice took effect on 13th November 2023 and the owners have one year from that date to comply.

When considering any action from the Council it is essential to consider whether or not it is in the public interest and expedient. The use of public funds must be carefully considered as any formal action brings with it a cost. The Council has taken appropriate and balanced steps to seek to bring the site into a good state of repair and has now adopted formal processes. I am certain that the community will see this as a positive step as the future of the White Lion is a cause of great concern locally.

15. **From Councillor Keen to Councillor Shoob, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness**

Together with a fellow councillor we were invited to visit two families that are living in Warren Close, both families have two children one of the children is a 17-week-old baby. Both of the houses have damp, and the residents are having to seal the windows and doors with tape to stop drafts coming through. In one of the houses the carpet of the previous tenant was left, and it was infested with fleas and the resident a single mother was left to take up carpet herself and she also had to dispose of it herself. Work that has been carried out in each house was of poor quality, appointments are changed or broken at the last minute and residents wait weeks and sometimes months for repairs to start.

Why does it take Mears so long to complete repairs and what checks are carried out on the work that Mears complete on behalf of FHDC on our housing stock?

ANSWER:

Thank you Councillor Keen for your question.

Without knowing the actual addresses it is difficult to respond, the housing team would therefore be keen to know which properties are being referred to in this question?

Most windows on the estate have been installed with vents to allow for air flow so they do not close fully. However, if the window is faulty a request can be made for the Area Surveyor to inspect and arrange repairs. The same applies for the doors which, I assume, is either the front or back door.

All reports of damp are taken very seriously, and an inspection is arranged. The housing team can then advise and offer guidance on preventing condensation and offer mould washes if required. If a building defect is noted and contributing to the problem, repairs are arranged through our contractor Mears.

As a rule, all flooring left by previous tenants is removed when the property becomes void, unless it is deemed to be good enough to remain. At viewing the prospective tenant is given the choice regarding whether to take the carpet or have it removed. However, if a tenant moves by way of a mutual exchange, the team are not involved in this.

If a resident is not happy with the quality of works carried out, or the length of time taken to complete a repair, a complaint should be made directly to Mears. If the tenant does not agree with the response, they can then go through the council's complaints procedure. An inspection request can be made for us to attend, and post inspect at any time.

Mears post inspect 10% of all completed works in line with their contract and our own Repairs & Maintenance team also carry out inspections on 10% on completed works.

Works are carried out in line with timescales set in the contract, but there are cases where they unfortunately they can overrun due to sickness absence, delay in sourcing materials or even tenants refusing access to the property. Mears must submit a time variation on the works order which in turn is approved or rejected by the Neighbourhood Surveyor.

Mears have provided the council with a good, consistent service in recent years. In their own year to date satisfaction surveys, the percentage of tenants satisfied with day-to-day repairs is at 83% and the percentage of all responsive repairs completed on time is at 94%, year to date.

In our own tenant-wide satisfaction survey, which the council carried out in autumn last year:

Overall Satisfaction with repairs had gone up from 61% to 72%;
Satisfaction with the time taken to complete the most recent repair went up from 61% to 66%;
Satisfaction that the home is well maintained went up from 65% to 70%;
And Satisfaction that the home is safe increased from 65% to 78%, so up by 13%.

16. **From Councillor Keen to Councillor Shoob, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness**

Although I take on board the lack of council housing in the district, is it appropriate to place families with small children in house on age designated estates where the properties are cramped and have very little secure outside space?

ANSWER:

Thank you Councillor Keen for your question.

Generally speaking, all council homes are allocated via the Choice Based Lettings system and an applicant will only be offered a property if they have chosen to bid for it and are eligible to do so.

The Housing service does not have 'age designated estates' as such, we only have some age designated blocks, or individual units. If I have understood correctly that you are referring again to Warren Close, although the flats are age designated, all the houses there are General Needs and all the houses there have private back gardens.