

Council – 28 February 2024

Councillor Questions:

1. From Councillor Lockwood to Councillor M Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration

As you are aware Kent County Council has taken the decision to end the commission of youth services in Kent. 'Salus', to whom KCC subcontract the running of youth provision, want to continue to operate the Hythe Youth Centre, which has over 800 members from across the district, and remain responsible for the Safeguarding procedures at youth clubs at New Romney and Lympne. They are actively trying to secure alternative sources of funding. Does FHDC have any plans to offer support for vital youth services across the district?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Lockwood, and I share these concerns.

Whilst the council recognises the importance of working with young people and engaging with them on the delivery of key services regrettably, we cannot step in and fund KCC services, in part, due to our own financial position.

We will continue to work with KCC through the Local Children's Partnership Group for Folkestone and Hythe as their family hub model develops and we always look at ways of supporting young people on joint projects or other initiatives, for example, through the Folkestone and Hythe Community Safety Partnership, local sports and leisure providers and the District Food Network.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Can I request you connect with Jane Darling on this matter?

ANSWER:

Yes, I would be happy to.

2. 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 for your question, Councillor Keen. Generally speaking, all council homes are allocated via the Choice Based Lettings system Kent HomeChoice

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 do not have 'age designated estates' we have only have some age designated blocks, or individual units. For instance at Warren Close, although the flats are age designated, all the houses are General Needs. The houses all have private back gardens.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Can you look at Warren Close again? In the flats that are age designated, there are people under 40 living, and they are making it difficult for the elderly residents.

ANSWER:

Very happy to take that up after the meeting.

After the meeting, the following additional response was provided:

Age designated properties will normally be allocated to those aged 50 or over, or those under 50 with medical assessment who require this type of accommodation. Although in areas of lower demand some properties designated for older people may be advertised without an age restriction. We are not aware of any recent incidents that are making it difficult for elderly residents. If Cllr Keen could let our Neighbourhood Management team know of any specific incidents we will investigate this?

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

Could it please be explained why we as a council find it appropriate to place families with babies, newborns and children in temporary accommodation where they are not allowed to take washing machines and freezers? These families are often in this accommodation for over a year and sometimes longer. Launderettes are expensive and these families are more often than not fleeing domestic violence, economically challenged and time consuming if you are fitting them in around children and work.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Keen. I do appreciate that living in temporary accommodation can be an extremely difficult time for households who are affected by homelessness. Unfortunately, due to the nature and limited supply of temporary accommodation available at short notice, it is often not possible to provide washing machines and freezers in the accommodation, although, we will always provide fridges and ovens for cooking. The accommodation is intended to be short-term and due to the work of our Housing Options Team, on average, households spend less than 4-months in temporary accommodation before moving on into permanent accommodation.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

I meant for those people who want to take their own washing machines and fridge freezers to the properties. Often young mums freeze their breast milk. Most people we accommodate are on limited or low wages, and can't afford to go to the launderette or buy food in small packets, and the accommodation has got space for the appliances, so why aren't we allowing them to take their own goods into the properties?

ANSWER:

Happy to take this up if you provide specific examples.

After the meeting, the following information was provided:

Unfortunately, it would not be practical for residents to take their own washing machines into Temporary Accommodation properties as often properties are let at short notice and space is often limited. In addition, we are not able to confirm if individual properties have the appropriate connections to install a washing machine, and the council aren't able to verify if any such private installation is safe and won't cause damage to the accommodation. If Cllr Keen is able to supply us with any specific cases where residents are struggling to manage in TA, we will of course do everything we can to assist and advise individuals.

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

The Road of Remembrance where we recently had the landslip, and where over the years there have been several near misses for drivers and pedestrians alike. Could I ask that we speak with KCC and either make this road one way or we have it pedestrianised ?

ANSWER

Thank you for your question, Councillor Keen.

Officers have been working closely with Kent County Council following the original landslip on 27th January. KCC as the highway authority have closed the road for public safety until the slip area is cleared.

There have been further significant slips over last weekend and on Monday this week. Timescales for clearance work are unknown at this time as the safety of people working in the area has to take priority. Officers will provide further updates to members in due course.

Officers have made contact with the East Kent Highway Improvements Team and asked them to consider your request to either make the road one way or have it pedestrianised. They will consider any road safety and accident data

that they have available when considering this proposal. Officers will update you when they hear back from the East Kent Highway Improvements Team

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

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

Could we have an have an update on what the yearly cost of the Otterpool site is, staff salaries , directors fees etc?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Keen.

As Members will recall, in October 2023 Cabinet agreed the outcomes of an in-depth management review of the Otterpool Park project, which I completed along with the support of external advisors and senior officers. In summary, the outcome of the review was that we should seek to progress the delivery of Otterpool Park through a strategic joint venture partnership and that, as we worked through the process to secure a partner, an 18-month transition plan and budget would be put in place for Otterpool Park LLP (the LLP).

The development of the LLP budget has been subject to the same rigorous scrutiny that all Council projects and services have been through as we prepared the budget, with a focus on identifying only essential spend for the expected 18-month transition period. This has included a review of the staff resource required for this period.

Subject to the decisions to be taken on the Council's budget later this evening, the 18-month operating budget for the LLP will be circa £9.95m. As per the Cabinet decision last October, this has been agreed by the S151 officer, in consultation with me as Leader, and is within the overall budget which the Council has already set aside for the project. To answer the specifics of your question, the budget includes:

£964,000 for site related costs;
£1,607,000 for staff salaries; and
£45,000 for director remuneration.

Once agreed, updates on the LLP transition plan and budget will be included in regular finance monitoring reports to the Finance and Performance Sub Committee, Cabinet and the Otterpool Park Owners' meeting. Work to secure investment into the project through a joint venture partnership will be the subject of reports to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet in due course. I would like to add that today is a big day. I can't give any information at present, but this is very positive.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Could you inform the council if the Councillors who sit on the Board of Otterpool Park LLP receive an additional SRA?

ANSWER:

Yes, my understanding is that the board members do receive an SRA.

(The Chief Executive then confirmed that the members on the Board are entitled to receive an SRA if they wish to, but if they receive an SRA for another role within the council, they can only select to receive one).

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

Given the Developer has appealed the Planning Committees decision to refuse outline planning permission at High Knocke, the people of Dymchurch want to know if the district council will be supporting them and be contesting the Developers Planning Appeal to the Inspector?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Cooper.

As a member of the Planning and Licensing Committee I am sure you will appreciate that the appeal is subject of a statutory legal process. All I will therefore say is that the Planning Committees' reasons for refusal will be defended robustly in any appeal process or hearing.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Councillor Cooper advised that if anyone is affected by this appeal, he would advise them to write to the inspector.

7. From Councillor A Martin to Councillor M Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration

During last month's debate on the motion to delay introduction of the committee system I heard a number of members express the view that this change is something residents are strongly passionate about. Given the extremely poor attendance at the public meeting, and low response to the consultation – Is it fair to assume that this topic is of no interest to the public or does the council have a problem with how it engages with residents?

ANSWER

Thank you for your question, Councillor A Martin.

As you rightly say, when council last met several members in this chamber highlighted public interest in this subject and I am keen we do all we can to engage with the residents.

I took part in the open public session and numbers were lower than expected. However, the fact that there was an invitation to the public to contribute to the debate, and that the meetings of the member working group, which steers the move to a committee system, can be viewed online is an example of the commitment of this Administration to improve engagement on this important subject.

To your wider point, I do not believe this Council has a problem with how it engages with residents. This Administration is actively championing the need for better engagement on local issues and doing more than this Council has ever done to ensure residents' views are taken on board across a wide range of issues.

I am aware that Members are actively meeting with communities across the district, which represents a significant step forward for the Council, including the creation of community forum in Folkestone. North Downs ward councillors have established their own forum and, along with my fellow Cheriton councillors, I am involved in setting up a similar forum in my own ward. Our work to engage on regeneration projects has also stepped up a level, for example the methods of consultation employed for the Folkestone: A Brighter Future project have been extremely well received, with young people and schools better at the core of the engagement. Last night, Overview & Scrutiny agreed we should explore further the possibility of establishing a Youth Forum.

I am positive about the Council's approach to engagement with residents across the district but do think that we can continue to improve on the excellent progress this administration has made. If Members have views on how this might be achieved, then I would be very pleased to hear from them.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

If we don't have a problem with engagement, and are doing lots to encourage positive engagement, why is the public not interested in the topic of moving to a committee system?

ANSWER:

There could be lots of reasons for this. I've worked in communications for much of my career, and that involves a lot of different ways to engage and consult with people. On some subjects it is easier than others. I'm sure you can think of examples where residents engage fully, ie buses, parking. On others we have to work harder. I think this is what we are doing and should continue to do. I'm happy to hear other ideas on how we can do that.

- 8. From Councillor A Martin to Councillor J Martin, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy**

I am pleased to see the ongoing engagement with Southern Water in relation to the various issues with sewage and pumping stations. Is there an opportunity within these discussions to raise the topic of the treatment plants and pumping stations that the council inherited from East Kent Housing and are currently under the management of the council on the Marsh? These create a significant cost and management burden to us, and arguably Southern Water are better placed to take ownership of them.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor A Martin. The issue of drainage at the Marsh is complex, and I'm happy to explain later.

Originally the sewage systems you refer to would have served the council owned properties across the marsh and other rural areas within the district. Over time a number of properties have been bought under the RTB, leading to the numbers shown in the table I will send to you (See appendix 1 attached).

All the properties which have been sold by the council have clauses within the title deeds which mean that they have to contribute to the cost of maintaining (repairs etc) the systems which they are connected to. The clauses within the title deeds differ throughout the periods for which they have been sold, but mainly say the same thing. The only exception is 12 houses at Moore Close that were built in the early 1990's for a housing association and are now owned by Southern Housing. The titles for those properties are slightly different.

The cost of the service varies depending on works required and the number of properties connected to the individual system. For the 2024/25 year, the costs vary between £432.19 to £1372.00 (capped) per property. Without the cap, the true cost for the most expensive system per property would be £2434.44.

Since the council housing service came back in-house Officers have been trying to have a meaningful dialogue with Southern Water regarding the pumping stations and water treatment works that currently fall into our remit on the Marsh. Unfortunately, Southern Water continue to maintain that these systems are not eligible for adoption. The difficulty remains that none of the facilities pump into Southern Water sewer, but into a 'private network' owned by the Council. They have stated that even if they were to put in a mains sewer scheme and these assets were connected to it rather than the treatment works, they still would not be adoptable as the DEFRA criteria requires that they be connected as of 1 July 2011 to be eligible. These discussions with Southern Water continue.

Long-term management of the sewerage service on the Marsh will need to be reviewed as part of the service charge de-pooling exercise that is currently being carried out, as in some cases we have a small number of tenants alongside a number of private owners benefitting from this service. In some instances there is a lack of equity in the service charges levied with some historical capping of costs applied, which means that the council is not

receiving all income due to it in the management and maintenance of these pumping stations, which as indicated above is a burden to the HRA and the council.

So in answer to your question Councillor Martin, I agree these systems create a significant cost and management burden to us, and, indeed, arguably Southern Water may be better placed to take ownership of them but currently they do not agree.

I will attach a list of properties that connect into the sewage/waste water systems that come under the HRA with my written answer.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

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

It has been brought to my attention the Dymchurch Dippers Sea Swimming Group have had to advise their members it was not advisable to go into the sea due to continued discharge of sewage water across the Bay. Could you please advise on the actions the council is taking on:

1. Putting pressure on Southern Water to upgrade the sewage plants on the Marsh and to stop them polluting our beaches.
2. Querying why is Hythe being upgraded and not the Romney Marsh.
3. Notifying people and others to ensure the residents of and visitors to the Romney Marsh are updated about the beaches and sea water standards.

and finally, would you please call a public meeting and invite the Environment Agency, Southern Water, Local Parish Councils and concerned local stake holders to come along in order to work together to try to resolve these and similar matters?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Cooper.

I think that there is a shared concern across the council and its community generally about the performance of Southern Water and its management and investment in the local water infrastructure. The council has actively and at times robustly raised these concerns at a regional and local level with Southern Water and the Environment Agency, who have the regulatory responsibility. We now have regular engagement with Southern Water and Cllr Cooper recently attended one of these meetings. As you know I signed a letter to OFWAT recently along with many other District Councils across the South of England asking OFWAT to take legal action against Southern Water for consistent failure to meet their customer needs.

I have asked officers to contact Southern Water for a specific update on your first two points related to the upgrading of sewage plants on the Marsh and in Hythe. I will ask them to share the response with you when received. As far as I currently know, and you will also know this from the Southern Water presentation, the problems around Littlestone may be associated with leaking Cess Pits. Southern Water have offered to renew these Cess Pits. Elsewhere, Southern Water have been relining sewers and finding illegal connections and disconnecting them. The problems, however, persist. The latest testing included species markers to try and establish if the E.coli in the sea came from livestock, this extensive testing showed sea bird and human traces in every sample and while there were traces of most livestock these were at very low levels and intermittent. The current thinking is the problem is from human sources.

On your third point about notification, the council is required to update the bathing water quality signage at beaches if the classification changes in time for the start of bathing season in May. This is completed by the Environmental Protection Team, who have changed the main notice at Littlestone, and will be updating the other signs along the beach shortly. Further to this we have recently renewed all of the beach signage and included QR codes which when scanned take the user directly to the Beachbuoy app with live water quality information for that location.

In response to your last point about a public meeting with Southern Water and Environment Agency. I believe that a meeting is being arranged by Southern Water and the EA to which the council has already committed. We are expecting details soon and these will be shared with members.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Can I just make an observation? There is a lot of concern around the testing by the environment agency, that the information doesn't go onto beach buoy, and about the adverse effect that these tests will have during the summer, especially on next season. There are a lot of businesses and people out there who want action, not words.

ANSWER:

I share all of those concerns, they are very real and pertinent.

10. **From Councillor Davison to Councillor Holgate, Cabinet Member for Place Plan, Heritage, Tourism and District Economy**

Please could we have an update about the medical centre that was proposed for the Victorian part of Folca (formerly Debenhams)?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Davison.

The provision of a new medical centre remains a priority for the Council (and partners) along with ensuring that the whole of the Folca building is brought back into a positive use for the town centre. The local GP practices leading the medical centre project, and Integrated Care Board, are working together with the Council to bring this ambitious project to fruition. I don't have details to share yet but there will be a full Member and community engagement in due course.

In parallel we are working up plans for the redevelopment of the Folca 2 building (the art deco fronted building), including proposals for the Council to relocate to there from the current Civic Centre site. This proposal will also include the potential for other public sector agencies to be based in Folca and options for commercial leisure use.

Folkestone: A Brighter Future (the £22m Levelling Up Fund project) includes circa £2m spend for initial works that are required for the 1st phase of the redevelopment of Folca 2, no matter what the building will be used for in the future, and we have a design team working on this at present. Works are planned to start in summer 2024 subject to the relevant approvals.

These are complex projects and do take time to come forward. It is intended that we will take a report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee and then Cabinet through April and May 2024 setting out proposals for Folca and the medical centre.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Can you clarify if other sites are being looked at for the potential medical centre?

ANSWER:

Yes they are.

11. From Councillor Davison to Councillor M Blakemore, Cabinet Member for Community and Collaboration

Please could we have some more details about the work of the Folkestone Community Forum - for example topics that have been discussed and work that is taking place?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Davison.

Folkestone is undergoing a dramatic period of change. At the heart of this will be the £20 million levelling up fund regeneration of the town centre, a new future for the Folca building, along with the seafront, harbour and Ship Street developments which are will also transform our town.

There are many stakeholders involved in this and all deserve a voice. The many community groups and organisations which enrich Folkestone and help to make it what is now and what it will be in the future offer invaluable perspectives. As the district council we have a leading role in managing the change taking place around us and believes its work will be supported through the establishment of a community forum, to bring the Council closer to stakeholders and them to each other, to seek common purpose and find ways in which all can work together to best effect.

Therefore, a Folkestone Community Forum was established in October 2023 by Cabinet Members to create a forum for members, officers and representatives of stakeholder groups to have meaningful engagement in an effective and efficient way.

The Leader, Cllr Holgate and I are the main Cabinet Members involved. It has been agreed that the forum will meet quarterly and be chaired by a community representative. Folkestone Town Council are also invited to take part.

There have been two meetings thus far and the main topics of discussion were the Levelling Up Fund project, Folca, parking, transport links, Grace Hill Library, the Licensing Forum and community safety. These topics for discussion were brought forward by the community groups as well as the Council.

I would be happy to send you a copy of the Terms of Reference for the group, and list of members, if that would be helpful.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Could we look at how we make sure there is a link between district councillors in Folkestone and the forum? I think there isn't district councillor representatives on the forum at the moment, only Cabinet Members. Could we also look at a way to share the minutes from the meetings with Members too?

ANSWER:

I don't think it's a problem to share the minutes The forum covers the whole of the district council area, which would be 12. We were conscious of not making it too council heavy. It is very much led by the community, who set the agenda in consultation with us. I'm happy to share that, and happy if any Councillors want to attend, although that is probably for the chair of the forum to agree.

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

Please could we have an update on the Leas pavilion development from the council's perspective?

ANSWER:

We understand that works have progressed on site with the construction of the below ground sprinkler tanks which is now around 60% complete. These works are being carried out with a limited workforce and are to be completed before progress can continue building upwards on the two wings of the project.

We have been informed that the developer is in the process of changing funders due to their existing funders modifying their terms and demands in response to the shifting economic climate. However they are confident that this re-negotiation of funds will conclude by the end of March, which will enable works to continue on site in April.

I share your concern about the reduction of activity on site so am encouraged to hear that the developer has extended his thanks to the council for its continued support and has confirmed that they are looking forward to completing the development.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Have you got any information about changes to road restrictions around the site, for example, as we know around the site at the moment, pavements are non-existent on some sides of the site? Is there any information around that in regard to the development, and changes there?

ANSWER:

I haven't got that information to hand, but I will find out and feed back.

After the meeting, the following information was provided:

The closing of the footpaths is control and monitored by KCC Highways & Transportation. However, I would imagine the current closures approved by KCC would remain in place while the project continues.

13. From Councillor Cooper to Councillor Scoffham , Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Biodiversity

The public can get information about discharges in the bay from things such as, for example, beachbouy and SSRS, but this only gives discharge information for the outlets at designated bathing areas, however, there are other outlets which are not considered at designated bathing areas such as for example, at Willop/Redoubt - which is used by a number of sea swimmers. As you will be aware It's understood discharges from any outlet affects the whole bay which is evidenced by Dymchurch not releasing all last season. But having high bacteria readings during test dates when other outlets were discharging. Can we please find out why is there no apparent transparency about these outlets and please can the council pressure Southern water and the EA make this data available on beachbouy etc? In so doing, I along with a number of others, would like to

have a look/tour at the New Romney plant and the Willop depot, to get a better understanding of how it all works - or should work! Can you please use your best endeavours to make this happen and also include other interested parties.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Cooper

I share your concerns about poor bathing water quality which is quite unacceptable. Your support and constructive suggestions about better monitoring and site visits is something which I very much appreciate.

I have asked officers to contact Southern Water about the points you make and to ask for a response that could be shared with you. I would be equally interested to visit the New Romney and Willop facilities and will see if this can also be arranged.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

Can I also make a point, that among other things, that we need to involve more people? There are specialists aching to get involved and offer support. Lets be more responsive to what people are saying out there.

14 From Councillor Keen to Councillor Prater, Deputy Leader and cabinet Member for Finance and Governance

How many of our tenants are in receipt of housing benefits and how many are working and receiving housing benefit?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Keen.

As of 26 February 2024 there are currently 1,496 Council tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit. Of these households, 50 are registered as in employment or self-employed.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

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

What is the age breakdown of residents in age designated apartments in Warren Close?

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor Keen.

To make best use of housing stock council properties are designated as being for:

- General needs use. General needs properties such as houses or flats will usually be allocated to persons under 60 unless there are special circumstances.
- 'Age designated' properties, such as some bungalows, will normally be allocated to those aged 50 or over, or those under 50 with Band B medical assessment for mobility who require this type of accommodation. Although in areas of lower demand some properties designated for older people may be advertised without an age restriction.

This is very different to 'sheltered housing' or Independent Living for older people. When allocating Independent Living properties, although the same general principles as for other property types will apply, an assessment of an applicant's suitability and need for support must be completed before any tenancy is offered.

Independent Living schemes are managed differently, being subject to slightly different regulation with on-site Officers, whereas general needs stock will have a patch-based Neighbourhood Services Officer should they need to discuss any tenancy or neighbourhood matters. Although in order to be eligible for sheltered housing under the current Allocations policy, applicants must be over 50 years old or registered disabled, in reality applicants are more likely to be 60+ when allocated the property and the current age criteria for Independent Living is being reviewed.

Warren Close is currently referred to as 'age designated' properties, and is managed as part of the general needs socially rented stock.

Warren Close itself (34 properties)

- The youngest tenant is 46, the oldest tenant is 96. The average age is 64.

Neason Court (22 properties) – (which is also in Warren Close)

- The youngest tenant is 52, the oldest tenant is 88. The average age is 67.

I trust that this responds to the query.

SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION:

None.

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

Can the Leader confirm that flood prevention measures, including ditch inspections, that were not carried out in the periodical inspection programme in 2017, will now be actioned as a matter of urgency. The ditches in question

were in St Nicholas Road, New Romney and are the responsibility of the District Council.

ANSWER:

Thank you for your question, Councillor. FHDC assist with the maintenance of St Nicholas Road drainage ditch under the Land & drainage Act 1991 using its permissive powers. As the properties in St Nicholas road have the ditch backing on to their gardens they have Riparian ownership, and the maintenance responsibility ultimately remains the responsibility of the property owners, not the District Council.

FHDC inspect ditches under its permissive powers granted by the Land & Drainage Act 1991 on an annual basis and carry out strimming on a yearly basis where ditches are accessible and as required clear silt from ditches.

In April 2017 EPS Design carried out a full survey of all drainage ditches and produced a report of obstructions. No inspection was possible of stretch G from properties 64 – 88 St Nicholas as there was no direct means of access to the ditch for maintenance purposes and it appears that some of the gardens of surrounding properties have extended and built over the ditch, it could not be confirmed if these sections have been culverted. Following the reports in 2017 a number of obstructions were cleared by FHDC to all ditches.

The challenge with the St Nicholas Road ditch is that access is very restricted for the majority of its length as it is contained within private residents gardens. FHDC have inspected St Nicholas Road where possible, we have responded to resident reports of possible obstructions and have written to property owners when advised of challenges. What we cannot do is inspect ditches which are entirely within a property owner's garden on a yearly basis or if they are culverted. If there is an obstruction we have to rely on reports from property owners.

Following the response being given, the time limit for Councillor questions expired. However, the supplementary question had already been submitted and is therefore answered below:

Supplementary question:

Two residents from St Nicholas road were displaced by the flooding in November 2023 and are still awaiting completion of repairs to their property. In this time, they have still continued to pay Council Tax. Would the Leader support the reimbursement of Council Tax to these two residents, as they have received no additional financial support from any agency. FHDC Officers have confirmed they can apply to the Valuation Office to have their properties exempt but this would not result in reimbursement of any previously paid Council Tax.

ANSWER:

Again, Thank you for your question Councillor Thomas.

I fully sympathise with these two residents, however the district council does not have a scheme in place to support or give exemptions or refunds. As you mention in your question, if a resident considers that a property is uninhabitable, they can make a request to the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) to have it removed from Council Tax listings. If they agree that it should be removed, they will inform the Council and we would be able to remove it from the date we are given by them. This would remove the charge from the given date. In my written answer, I will provide the contact details for the Valuation Office:

For information, their contact details can be found using the link below:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/valuation-office-agency>

<https://www.gov.uk/challenge-council-tax-band>

If these residents are in financial hardship they can contact the welfare team who will review their income and expenditure to consider if the Council Tax is not affordable

Appendix 1 – additional information in respect of Question 8

Pumping Stations – No of Properties Served

Site	No of Users	FHDC Tenants	Freeholders
Kings Street	14	7	7
Moore Close	27	8	19
Ranmore	4	1	3
Ivychurch Road	4	2	2
Elmsfield	16	3	13
Rectory Road	18	5	13
Patchway	8	5	3
Rectory Close	4	4	0
Churchview & Clarklands	24	9	15
Stelling Minnis	19	9	10
Court-at-street	7	7	0
The Limes/St Catherine's	12	9	3

Treatment works (or pump & treatment systems)

Site	Connected properties	FHDC Tenants	Fhold
Hammell Cottages	7	4	3
Moore Close, Ranmoore, & King Street	45	16	29
Elmsfield & The Limes & St Cathrines	28	12	16

A further 7 properties are serviced which are stand alone tenanted.