

COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 14

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

Councillor Crampton asked:

Parking Enforcement was suspended mid-March and we would like to thank all the officers and staff in the Environment and Technical department for all their hard work during this pandemic. We are aware that enforcement was redeployed to other duties such as supporting the vulnerable with food and essential medicines. Now enforcement is beginning to restart, when will parking charges be reintroduced across our Council owned car parks?

Council Oliver responded:

Thank you Cllr Crampton and I will pass on your personal thanks to the team. On parking, a paper has been published and will be debated at Cabinet next week. Its recommendation is to reintroduce charges from the 1st August. This will allow a month of trading for all retail/hospitality businesses on our high streets and hopefully encourage shoppers to return. To further increase the feeling of safety for returning visitors we have also been able to negotiate a change to our telephone parking service (Mi Permit) that removes the 20p transaction charge on all ticket purchases below £1.60. If a visitor signs up for this service, they can park without touching our ticketing machines for our standard published tariffs at no additional cost. I hope you would agree that this is a significant improvement from other authorities who have continued to charge and obliged use of their touch ticketing machines through lockdown such as Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

Councillor Crampton asked a supplementary question:

Would it not be better to wait for the long-awaited parking review to start charging again?

Councillor Oliver responded:

We have benchmarked HDC alongside other Councils. As this is an important source of income to HDC we will be re-engaging with Parish Councils where there is 30mins free parking.

Councillor Crookes asked:

Who now owns The Swan pub in North Warnborough?

Councillor Radley to respond:

It is currently owned by a PO box in the British Virgin Islands.

Councillor Crookes asked a supplementary question:

When do we expect the process to be completed and when will we take ownership to tidy up and for the restoration? Do you have any ideas on timescale?

Councillor Radley responded:

Contractors are due on site to assess the damage and secure the building. On receipt of a favourable quote, we will engage the work. We hope to close the legal matters imminently and the way forward will be the subject of a report to Cabinet in August.

Councillor Crookes asked:

Hart Leisure Centre has been, since it first opened, a hugely successful asset for the district, especially for the health of residents. When will it re-open?

Councillor Radley responded:

Across England leisure centres (swimming pools and gyms) are awaiting the Government's announcement as to when they can reopen. It is not a decision for Hart District Council to make. However, we have already been working with Everyone Active to look at practical solutions so as to prepare the Leisure Centres for re-opening while allowing for social distancing once the government mandated restrictions are lifted.

Councillor Crookes asked:

How and why did the Council decide to use Capita to process the COVID Business Grants?

Councillor Radley responded:

The decision to have Capita process the COVID Business Grants was in effect made by the previous Conservative administration when in 2015 it awarded the outsourcing of the Revenues & Benefits service to Capita.

Previously in the 2008 contract Cllr. Stuart Bailey had made strenuous efforts to ensure that Revenue & Benefits staff remained on-site. Unfortunately, when renegotiating the contract in 2015 the previous Conservative administration did not see the benefit of keeping staff on site and so we lost both the personal contacts and more importantly the means to access the data held by Capita relating to the businesses that pay Business Rates. Without this data available to us we had no choice but to engage the only organisation which had access to this data, namely Capita.

I believe the previous administration made an error in handing over data to another organisation without ensuring the business to business APIs were available to have us harvest the data too. We could have then acted proactively to assist local businesses and lessen their stress.

Councillor Forster asked:

On the subject of Coronavirus support business grants for local Hart businesses, we're all pleased that Hart has now delivered over £12m of the first phase of £14.1m support allocated by government to Hart.

Officers worked incredibly hard, so we'd like to praise the finance team and those involved, especially after it was realised that Capita had apparently allocated insufficient resource during the initial few weeks to be able to process properly applications and queries.

A number of businesses have complained to councillors that communication from Hart and Capita was really bad. Initial automated email replies said they'd get a response to queries within 10 days, but many had to wait weeks and weeks with no reply to repeated pleas for help.

These delays caused a great deal of anxiety and hardship for some businesses, owners, and staff.

What did Hart do to address the issues?

Councillor Radley responded:

I was at a virtual meeting only yesterday, along with Cllr. Crookes, in which we and the other Council's engaged in our shared services contract, were reporting similar concerns to those expressed by all of us at Hart over the length of time many businesses were waiting for an update. In terms of lessons to learn from this particular aspect of the COVID response it is not to underestimate the importance of good communications.

Cllr. Forster will know from my previous answer that we had no direct access to the data which would have helped us to guide businesses. Hart officers, particularly in the Audit Team went above and beyond in trying to help businesses access the information they required to discover where they had stumbled in making their applications. However, they were dependent upon the availability of the Revenues & Benefits team at Capita who were themselves working flat out to pay those grants which they were in a position to pay. It would seem to be the case that Capita favoured putting effort into paying those grants which they could pay as quickly as possible over communicating with businesses who had less clear-cut applications.

Certainly, when we come to review our COVID response this will be one of the aspects which I would personally wish to see explored. Although paying as many businesses as possible as quickly as possible, versus prioritising those who had perceived issues with their application is a subjective call to make.

Councillor Dorn asked:

Why have Planning Committee meetings not been restarted when virtual meetings were quickly permitted by government and neighbouring local authorities maintained a democratic approach to the process by holding them remotely as early as 30th April (Surrey Heath)

Councillor Oliver responded:

Planning committees have not been abandoned or stopped. The next is already published to be held on the 8th July. A communication on how public speaking will be handled is to be sent out shortly.

Meetings have not been held as no planning applications that have required the committee to meet have been ready. This is in part due to the requirement of staff to visit sites and post notices. We have amended these working practices to enable as many planning applications to be determined as soon as possible.

There has been much misinformation placed in the public domain. It is true Officers drafted such COVID contingency plans in April and discussed these with Members including Councillor Southern. The Planning Committee, however, is the only body that can change the scheme of delegation but it has not yet met. So, no alternative COVID scheme of delegation is operating. Furthermore, no application that would otherwise have been considered by Planning Committee has been determined under the potential COVID19 scheme either, and the position will not change unless the Planning Committee gives its direct consent.

Councillor Dorn asked a supplementary question:

He thanked the Planning Team for all their hard work and flexibility. However, he felt it was undemocratic for the Planning Team to make an emergency decision which without keeping Members informed.

Councillor Oliver responded:

Contingency plans were in place, but nothing had been acted on. When decisions are made, they are published. Apologies were made if a member of the public felt they have been misled.