

COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 12

QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

Christine Strudwick asked:

What is the view of the Portfolio Holder for Place on the Levelling Up white paper published this month and the potential impact of Sections 3.4.1 and 3.4.2 on Hart District Council planning policy?

Councillor Cockarill responded:

In terms of the potential impact on Hart's Planning Policy of the White Paper, the most important thing will be the supporting guidance which flows from a future Levelling-Up Act, when the White Paper proposals have become law. There may also be a Planning White Paper in the wings, which might have a greater impact on us than the Levelling Up White Paper.

One thing though, is clear: The Government wants local authorities to adopt a Brownfield-First approach in Planning Policy. It is worth noting in this context that Hart's Local Plan is now delivering a strategic brownfield development of 1500 homes and community infrastructure, including a new primary school on the old Pyestock site (now Hartland Village). We are also about to begin a full study of our urban areas, to assess the capacity available for extra brownfield development in our existing settlements. Our sound, robust Plan has protected greenfield sites such as Pale Lane and Hop Garden in Hook. It is unfortunate that the previous Administration failed to get a Local Plan in place earlier; if it had, sites such as Grove Farm may well have been saved, as well.

Of course, planning policy never stands still. I believe that the best way to protect our green spaces and provide regeneration opportunities for our towns and villages, is to be proactive in our Planning Policy, rather than rely on Planning by Appeal to meet our housing and infrastructure needs. This is why back in November, I asked Cabinet to agree to launch a review of our current Local Plan to evaluate its progress and assess whether any alterations need to be made, considering emerging Government policy and guidance. This will ensure that our Local Plan remains sound and robust as the wider planning context evolves.

Christine Strudwick asked a supplementary question:

What specific steps will Hart now take and when will they take them to assess the need to update the current local plan based on the white paper given that the Council has declared a ten-year land supply?

Councillor Cockarill responded:

The timescales for the next pieces of work are still a little vague, we are expecting the capacity study to be done early this year. The local plan review is expected later in the year to come back to a discussion in Cabinet in the Autumn. We are currently working through next years' service plans and the dates will become clearer over the next few weeks.

Dr Angela McFarlane asked:

In 2021, Hart DC imposed a new schedule of tariffs for off street parking in Odiham. This was to bring all rural car parks under the same tariffs. Comparing income from 2019 and 2021 (pre and post Covid) there has been a significant drop in income from parking - approximately 30% across Hart. Analysis of the figures for Odiham shows that there has been a significant drop in users of the car parks for extended stays which has led to a drop in footfall on the High St and reduced revenue overall for Hart. We note that the Hart budget for 22/23 allows for an anticipated reduction of 22% in parking revenue due to Covid. We suggest this is likely to be more due to the additional impact of higher pricing for parking longer than 2 hours - the all-day charge has risen from £2 to £4. My question is therefore this:

Will Hart consider reverting to the previous pricing point of £2 for more than two hours which attracted more customers to our High St and raised more revenue for Hart?
Asking Odiham Parish Council to subsidise a less productive tariff is not the answer.

Councillor Oliver responded:

I refer you to the email sent to Odiham Parish Council by the Head of Environment and Technical Services (Mr Elson) dated 31 January for further information to this answer. As a consequence of the Covid pandemic the District Council has seen an overall reduction in car park income across all of its car parks in 2021/22 when compared with 2019/20. As you have pointed out this has been factored into revenue projections for 22/23 within the draft budget. It is worth noting that the percentage reduction in income from the Odiham car parks in 2021/22 is significantly less than the percentage reduction in income from all other Hart off-street car parks.

When considering the amended car park charges in Odiham it is worth noting that the short stay charges for visits of up to 2 hrs were not altered when the new charging structure was agreed. It is generally accepted that most people who are visiting to shop or eat in local restaurants during the day do not stay longer than 2hrs, so I do not agree with your suggestion that the increase in charges for stays over 2hrs has led to a drop in footfall on the High Street. This is supported by the relative volume of tickets sold for 2hrs or less or over 2hrs across Hart. However, it does suggest that if there has been a reduction in footfall on Odiham High Street then this is as a consequence in changes in people's behaviour and shopping patterns rather than the change to the all-day car parking charge.

Before agreeing on implementation of the of the amended car park charges the District Council consulted all affected parish councils on the proposals and offered them the opportunity to fund an alternative charging structure. This offer was not taken up by Odiham Parish Council but was taken up by Hartley Wintney and Hook Parish Councils, and the initiative is proving very popular in both parishes.

When agreeing changes to the car park charges it is important that an equitable and consistent approach is applied, and the offer for Odiham PC to subsidise a charging structure in the same way as has been agreed by the other parishes is still available should the Parish Council wish to accept this provided the parish agree to fund the reduction in income.

Therefore, in summary, for the reasons given above the answer to your question is: No, Hart will not consider reverting to the previous pricing point of £2 for more than two hours unless the Parish Council agrees to fund the loss of income and pay Hart's reasonable costs for amending the car park charges.

Dr Angela McFarlane asked a supplementary question:

Looking at the last ten months of Odiham income it has taken ten months to generate the same income as 6 months in 2019, we do think the pricing is hitting your revenue, we would ask that Council Officers meet with Odiham Parish Council representatives to develop a more commercially effective strategy?

Councillor Oliver responded:

Officers met with Odiham Parish Council on car parking last week, we are always open to have a discussion, but your interpretation of the data is significantly different to the Officers interpretation, we are always happy to talk to Parishes, but not in producing agreements non-equitable with agreements already reached with other parishes.

Mr David Turver asked:

The outturn report refers to the original budget of £10,794K approved in February 2021. However, the budget approval included a contingency of £610K for "pressures": To what extent has this contingency been utilised and how will the use of the contingency impact the forecast full year deficit of £488K?

Councillor Radley responded:

The outturn paper considered at O&S gives a forecast projection based on the current snapshot of the revenue at the end of December 2021. It is not the confirmed figure for the FY, which is still in progress. The £610k of pressures called out in last year's budget landed as anticipated. The £488k projected deficit is made up of a number of very different line items which were discussed at length in O&S and are detailed in that

paper. It would be wrong to see this as an overspend as it has been the loss of Leisure Centre revenue due to the Covid lockdown which has had a significant affect.

Mr David Turver asked a supplementary question:

If you add the £610k pressures is the forecast deficit now over £1m?

Councillor Radley responded:

It does not work like that; the budget had a line item for known £610k pressures which we have spent. The projected deficit is £488k which is money we did not anticipate losing as revenue for the reasons as outlined at Overview and Scrutiny you cannot add the two together.

Mr David Turver asked:

The August O&S was told there was £6.8m of reserves in the General Fund at the end of FY20/21. The same paper recommended a minimum level of reserves of £5.3m, leaving a headroom of ~£1.5m.

With the current forecast deficit and the reserve transfer to cover the Leisure Centre shortfall, what is the current expectation of the reserve level, the minimum reserve and therefore the anticipated headroom at year end?

Councillor Radley responded:

As I have explained before the money used to subsidise the Leisure Centre through the Covid crisis is not being taken from general fund reserves. The table on page 58 of the budget report states that we have £6.9m in general fund reserves.

Mr David Turver asked:

Moreover, with the current level of forecast deficits into the future, can officers explain when they anticipate reserves falling below the recommended minimum level?

Councillor Radley responded:

This evening I am presenting a balanced budget which does not include any draw down from General Fund Reserves. This council will always seek to maintain reserves at a prudent level.

Mr David Turver asked a supplementary question:

The last MTFs showed a cumulative deficit of £3.8m. My question was about the forecast future deficit of a cumulative £3.8m.

Councillor Radley responded:

This is a balanced budget for this year, in future years if the government had given us an indication on its settlement we could plan ahead, as it is we cannot so I cannot make any clear statements on this as we do not have the information. What we do expect to have to do is make difficult choices to keep the budget balanced.

Mr David Turver asked:

What would be the consequences if that should occur and what further actions might be required to avoid reserves falling below the minimum level?

Councillor Radley responded:

The biggest challenge facing this council in terms of future budgets is the lack of a three-year settlement which prevents us from making long term strategic financial plans. It is a perennial concern that the coming years will see cuts in government funding which will require this council to make further cuts to our operational budget.

Mr David Turver asked:

Can you explain the massive "contract inflation" uplifts in the IT Contract (£164.1K/£356.4K = 46%); Grounds Maintenance (£86.3K/£356.7K = 24%); Street Cleaning (£138K/£604.2K = 23%); Waste (£181K/£1,775K = 10%) and the 5 Council Contract (£219.7K/£2,497K = 9%), all of which have increases far in excess of CPI (5.5%)?

Councillor Radley responded:

Contract inflation has been applied at 5.2%.

There are a number of reasons why there are uplifts in contracts, this is not just due to inflation it could be due to contractual changes, milestone delivery dates or a change in specification. In this case uplifts in the IT price are due to increased mobile phones for hybrid working, a move to subscription licensing, an increase in data storage capacity facilities and an improved disaster recovery contract, which is prudent given the current marked increase in cyber-attacks around the world.

Grounds maintenance contracts and street cleaning have been correctly zero based in the budget which was not the case in the past. Change in cost of the 5 Councils contract is due to a revised service delivery model due to insourcing as well as the end of loan payments which enabled to contract to take place. Increases in the waste contract are due to inflation and additional properties being served.

Mr David Turver asked:

Notwithstanding the stated £498K FY21/22 budget does not match the FY21/22 budget book, how can you justify the massive £394K or 79% total increase (£892K - £498K) in the cost of the Finance Department?

Councillor Radley responded:

HACFIN is the cost centre for Finance – the budget for 2021/22 in the 2021/22 Budget Book is not different to the 2021/22 Budget in the 2022/23 Budget Book. In other words, the 2021/22 budget numbers for HACFIN in this years (Draft) and last years (Final) Budget Book are the same.

The £498K can be found as the sub-total within HACFIN for Supplies and Services in the 2022/23 Budget.

Within this £498K is an exceptional item of £304K – this is prudent contingency for further increases in staff costs if needed following the national pay negotiations, additional inflationary pressures, and any costs attributable to signing the revised Leisure Contract.

Mr David Turver asked a supplementary question:

Do you agree better to cut Leadership costs rather than awarding a £42k salary increase?

Councillor Radley responded:

We have a line item in this budget to save costs within the Senior Leadership Team. This will require us to look at restructuring the Senior Leadership Team and we are expecting to realise cost savings in this budget. We are doing work internally to work out how this will happen.

Mr David Turver asked:

What specific deliverables will be produced from the new £250K climate change budget?

Councillor Radley responded:

We have a climate emergency; this planet is warming up and we are seeing the adverse effects. In declaring a climate emergency, this Council made a commitment to do something about it. That means having money available to react when the opportunities come up. There is work going on to understand what we could effectively do as a Council and the money will be used to finance that. Money left over can be used in subsequent years to fight this very important issue.

Mr David Turver asked a supplementary question:

Given the deficit, would it not be better to get the finances under control or to use the money to give a rebate to taxpayers rather than signal your virtue with other people's money?

Councillor Radley responded:

This is everybody's planet and residents are concerned. We are not running a deficit but a balanced budget. We are coming out of covid which had dire impacts for everybody. I am proud of the budget that does not drawdown on reserves and proud of Officers who have helped us put it together. I make no apology for putting money aside to fight climate change.

Mr David Turver asked:

The staff costs for Small SANG sites, Edenbrook, Commons (incl. Odiham), Bramshot, Fleet Pond and Elvetham Heath have gone up by around £187K in total. How many more people are going to be employed and what additional services can we expect from them?

Councillor Radley responded:

The differences are not caused by an increase in staff numbers but in the re-allocation of staff to the sites where they work. The Budget in 2021/2022 had Rangers working in their old locations and a lot of rangers were coded to Environmental Promotion strategy. This has been corrected in the new budget to reflect where staff primarily work.

Mr David Turver asked:

FY21/22's budget included a contingency of £610K. The budget for FY22/23 contains no contingency at all, so when unforeseen problems inevitably arise, how will they be funded?

Councillor Radley responded:

The £610K addressed contingencies which were known to be needed at the time. This is a zero-based budget with all known costs built in. There is a contingency held within Corporate Finance to cover additional inflationary and staff costs if needed (see my answer to q.2). Everything else is built in as part of the zero-based budget.

Mr David Turver asked:

I note the reduction in minimum reserve requirement to £4.1m. However, can you explain why you consider it prudent to hold no reserve to cover the possibility of reduced income due to voids or other non-collection of rent from the property portfolio.

Councillor Radley responded:

The Council receives property income rent from 3 properties being Centenary House, Edenbrook Apartments and Hedge End. This is what makes up the income budget. Edenbrook Apartments income expectation already contains an assumption for voids. Centenary House and Hedge End have tenants in each. Both are fully repairing leases which means if a tenant left, they would have to leave it in the same condition they rented it and both properties are on sufficiently long leases with break clauses that would enable the Council to find replacement tenants if needed. There is no indication that this would be the case hence there is no specific provision made in the reserve.