

Consultation responses received after the publication of Cabinet papers

Hastings Community Network

Councillor Chowney met with the Hastings Community Network on 7 February 2017. The following items were discussed:

Question: what does CPO stand for?

Response: CPO stands for Compulsory Purchase Order. The council uses Compulsory Purchase Orders as a tool to bring long term empty properties back into use.

Question: how long does the CPO process take?

Response: the full CPO process can take a long time, approximately 1 year from the council issuing the notice to the property being sold at auction. However, often the threat of CPO action is sufficient for the owners of long term empty properties to bring them back into use. The process does incur a cost to the council, as the authority is unable to recover administration costs from the proceeds of the sale of the properties.

Question: what can the council do to prevent the repossession of properties and homelessness increasing?

Response: The governments new Homelessness Reduction Bill includes new requirements for council's to provide additional advice and carry out homelessness prevention work. Hastings Borough Council has already been carrying out these activities, in partnership with the voluntary sector, for a long time. Additional funding of £63,000 has been allocated in the draft budget for homelessness prevention work.

Question: will the council support Seaview's Eco-Pod project, which provides temporary sleeping facilities on brownfield sites?

Response: the council will consider all options to address homelessness.

Question: what can be done to find alternative uses for the White Rock Theatre, which will reduce the need for the council to pay a subsidy to the operator?

Response: It will not be sustainable for the council to continue paying the current levels of subsidy to the operator of the White Rock Theatre, after the current contact has come to an end in 2 years' time. The council has already begun considering alternative uses for the site, as part of broader plans to improve the White Rock area.

Question: the focus on income generation activities by the council is to be welcomed; however, will there be an issue with borrowing limits?

Response: the council is able to set its own borrowing limit, taking advice from its Section 151 Officer.

Question: public conveniences are an essential service for many older people. What can the council do to maintain provision in the town?

Response: due to the long term reduction in its funding, the council has had to review all of the services it provides, including the provision of public conveniences. There are a number of alternative public toilets in the town centre, the building at Harold Place is also in a poor state of repair and will be costly to refurbish and maintain.

Question: the arts, culture and music are a key part of the identity of the town, how will the council's work to support these sectors be continued in the future?

Response: the ROOT1066 Festival, which was held last year to mark the 950th Anniversary of the Battle of Hastings, included a range of cultural events and helped develop the profile of the town. The proposed employment of the Cultural Manager post will enable the council to continue to act strategically and seek funding to continue to enhance our current offer. The council will look at the provision of leisure facilities when planning the development of the White Rock area.

Question: will the council reconsider deleting its contribution to the Dial-A-Ride service, particularly as East Sussex County Council will continue to provide funding for the service?

Response: the council will reconsider this proposal. It is hoped that officers could work with Dial-A-Ride to look at new ways of making the service more sustainable in the future, including commercial sponsorship.

Question: what are the plans for the future use of the buildings previously occupied by the University of Brighton? These buildings should be maintained for the benefit of the town.

Response: the University of Brighton previously occupied 3 buildings in the town centre. Two of these buildings were built using public money and the council is keen that this investment is retained for the delivery of HE in the town. Hastings Voluntary Action have been assisting the council by raising awareness of this issue. Sussex Coast College Hastings will be creating a University Centre within its building at Station Plaza.

Question: Universal Credit is likely to have a significant impact on vulnerable groups within the town. Community Partnership Funding (CPF) has also been reduced. CPF funding had previously been used to support a project which assisted claimants accessing Universal Credit. How can similar projects be maintained in the future? A similar issue is facing a project operated by the Education Futures Trust which aimed to support people with mental health problems.

Response: the council would work with these organisations to look at how this work can continue, in light of the new arrangements for CPF funding.

Question: what will happen to the bathing water quality requirements after the UK leaves the European Union?

Response: this is not yet clear, although it is expected that the requirements will remain the same for the foreseeable future.

Question: why has the estimated surplus from the selective licensing scheme been revised?

Response: the take up of the early bird offer, which offered discounted rates to landlords who registered their properties at the start of the scheme, was higher than originally anticipated. It was expected that the projections would be met over the life of the scheme. The team would also look at taking enforcement action against properties which were not registered for the scheme.

Question: has changes to legislation regarding HMO licensing, impacted the number of properties which can be included in the scheme? The voluntary sector is keen to work with the council regarding the implementation of the scheme, to ensure the changes do not adversely impact tenants.

Response: this question will be referred to the Assistant Director, Housing and Built Environment, for response.

HCN have also submitted the following statement after their meeting with the Leader of the Council:

1. Support for reconsideration of funding Dial-a-Ride Service

HCN encourages elected members to support Cllr Chowney's commitment to review the Community Partnership Funding for Hastings Community Transport's Dial-a-Ride service. Hastings & St Leonards Senior Forum, supported by Hastings and Rother Disability Forum made a strong case for a service that tackles social inclusion. Cllr Chowney offered to consider a further year's funding and support to look at replacing this stream with commercial sponsorship.

2. Support for reconsideration of Ore public toilets closure

HCN recognises the thinking behind closing public toilets to make savings when alternative facilities exist. Hastings Dementia Action Alliance highlighted the point that no doubt will be made by the petition to Cabinet that in Ore insufficient alternative facilities do not exist.

3. Support for ending the White Rock Theatre subsidy

HCN supports the view that renewal of the White Rock subsidy is untenable. It would like to engage in any consideration of development of alternative entertainment venues.

4. Support for Recognition of Public Investment in university buildings

HCN is engaged in ongoing partnership discussions with the continued offer of Higher Education in Hastings. HCN feels particularly strongly that the public investment in the university buildings is recognised and that effort is made to ensure these assets continue to serve the community for educational purposes. HCN was pleased Cllr Chowney shared and supported this view.

5. Support for Partner Discussions on Anti-Poverty Issues

HCN shares concerns raised by HBC in the Corporate Plan about homelessness, welfare reform and marginalised communities. HCN welcomes HBC's recognition to address these in partnership with the voluntary sector and the funding through the CPF stream.

In particular, Cllr Chowney committed to closer discussions with HCN about concerns raised by Horizons Community Learning about sustaining digital inclusion services for Universal Credit applicants.

There was also a commitment to discuss concerns raised by the Education Futures Trust around the commissioning of mental health support to young people.

HCN is keen to ensure these commitments arising from the consultation come to fruition.

6. Additional Information on Licencing queries

HCN will work with HBC to provide a fuller response to the queries raised by BHT regarding licencing.

Youth Council

Hastings Youth Council made the following comments as part of the Budget and Corporate Plan Consultation:

"We know Hastings Borough Council is going through tough times and the pressure placed on them by the government is demanding. We actively promote what is being proposed and the effort the council is making to reduce the impact on their services. The budget does not directly affect young people which we are very happy about!"
Huda, Chair of Hastings Youth Council

We would like to put forward the following comments:

We are happy for the Closure of Harold Place toilets, however the following must be thought of. What happens if homeless people need the loo? Could a charge of 20p help keep them open? Depending what goes on the site could be good for young people.

We disagree with the Closure of Ore toilets, as these are the only public toilets in Ore. You could do the 20p scheme to go in as no other toilets are around.

Seasonal Closure of Toilets Rock a Nore, Falaise Road, Alexandra Park. These are only seasonal so don't see a problem with this. Everyone agreed.

Community Partnership Fund Reduced, reduced but not cut is ok.

Council Tax Exemptions- They didn't understand why they would or should be exempt in the first place.

Cultural Development officer -This is spending rather than cutting. Think it is a good idea.

Additional Expenses to purchase land or business- all agreed good idea to make money and save jobs/ services."

Further public correspondence

Since the publication of the Cabinet papers, the following has been received:

- 6 e mails and 2 letters have been received objecting to the closure of public conveniences at Harold Place and Ore village. These conveyed a range of views and suggestions that coincide with those already noted in the Cabinet papers on this topic.
- An e mail by Hastings Green Party urging HBC to:
 - Build on its climate strategy and action plan by incorporating an annual carbon budget into its annual corporate budget, giving the example of Aberdeenshire Council as an example of how this could work.
 - Consider the development of affordable low carbon homes as part of its land and assets disposal, housing company and income generation ambitions.
- An e mail by Transition Towns Hastings urging HBC to take a holistic approach to climate change considering:
 - Further low carbon activities beyond recycling and generating green energy following HBC passing a fossil free motion last year.
 - Reviewing our Local Plan to ensure it adheres to the Government guidance on having a clear strategy to deal with climate change.

Comment: The corporate plan and Local Plan are subject to separate approvals processes.

Petitions

The council has received two further petitions objecting to the closure of public conveniences, an e petition with 676 signatures and a further petition from the Friends of the Old People with 201 signatures.

The Change.org petition previously referred to in the Cabinet papers at the close of consultation now has 1267 signatures.

Staff and Management Forum

Councillor Chowney met with the Staff and Management Forum on 9 January 2017. The following items were discussed:

Question: does the new homes bonus include properties which have been brought back into use?

Response: Yes it does, however, the bonus is based on the number of council tax band D equivalents. Hastings has a higher number of properties in lower council tax bands, compared to other authorities in East Sussex.

Question: have there been any exceptions to the 10% increase in fees and charges?

Response: the council can only increase fees and charges for discretionary items. Each fee and charge is reviewed and consideration given to the sensitivity of increasing it.

Question: is the council considering any new leisure facilities for the White Rock area, such as a bowling alley?

Response: any proposed development of the White Rock area will need to be self-financing. Bowling alleys can be challenging to make commercially viable.

Question: are there plans for a new swimming pool in the old town?

Response: in the past, consideration has been given to a new salt water pool. However, initial investigations found that this would not be possible.

Comment: Local Housing Allowance has not increased this year, so the levels remain the same as 2014.

Question: as part of the council's plans to address anti-social behaviour, will anything be done to tackle people who exceed the speed limit on mobility scooters?

Comment: it is not clear if the council can put any measures in place to address this, it is likely that this would need to be enforced by the Police.

Question: how will alternative provision of public conveniences be maintained in the town centre, if Harold Place toilets are closed?

Response: there are already a number of other public conveniences in the town centre, and the council will raise awareness of these if the Harold Place toilets are closed. Local authorities across the country are having to close public toilets, as a result of reductions to their funding.

Comment: it is to be welcomed that the call on the use of the council's reserves to balance the budget will be significantly less than originally expected. Staff across the council should be made aware of this, and thanked for their ongoing efforts to achieve savings and efficiencies.

Question: how much land does the council own outside the Borough?

Response: the council currently has limited land holdings outside the Borough. However, the council can purchase land anywhere, and opportunities for this may be considered as part of the income generation strategy.

Further Staff views

9 e mails were received from council staff during the consultation period. These focussed on potential impact of proposed staffing reductions including potential changes of roles, work focus and subsequent service provision. These submissions form part of the formal employee consultation processes which is managed by the Executive Manager for People and Business Support, working with relevant teams and managers, and overseen by the Director of Corporate Services and Governance.