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Following the traditionally quiet August, the Council meetings have started to pick up again in September. Here are highlights:

Policy Finance and Resources

Close to home I was glad to see an agreement that the lease be renewed for the Coastguard lookout station. The Coastguard along with the RNLI are vital elements of Bembridge and I know that we're immensely proud of the work that they do, so it was good to see the IoWC supporting them.

We also received a little positive news on finances. The Finance Officer had identified savings in reserves that he feels could be used to reduce the need to draw down on the Exceptional Financial Support loan. If that is the case then it is incredibly important as it avoids any ongoing loan interest, at least for this year. A lot still depends on the savings that can be made in year, but certainly welcome financial news at last. This was also followed later in the week by news of a successful application for government grant funding of £6m over the next two years, which goes some way to making up for the zero funding that the Island received from the Recovery Grant scheme earlier in the year. (It's a mystery to me how Southampton received £7.3m and Portsmouth £5.1m but we received absolutely nothing from that grant).

Any additional grants and positive financial news are welcomed, but there is still a long way to go to get the Council out of its financial difficulty. As a result, the Council has set up an Improvement Board including outside experts to assess areas where cost savings/extra income can be found and make recommendations to the Council. Unfortunately, I had to raise a few concerns around this Board during this meeting. I don't feel that appointment to this board, or its budget of £100k has been sufficiently scrutinised by Councillors. I also feel that the fact that it includes 3 Councillors from the Reform Party and no Councillors from any other political groups opens it up to accusations of political bias. I believe that this entire process should be much more open and transparent.

Full Council

On the whole it was a positive Full Council on Wednesday 16th September.

Not only did we manage to pass a new Corporate Plan setting out the vision and aims of the Council over the coming years, but we also finally, after many, many years of wrangling, agreed a new Island Plan.

This should provide a little more protection to the Island against any new inappropriate developments. The target for annual dwellings of 703 is still ridiculously high in my opinion, but it's much better than the Govnt target of 1050!

Both documents also afford us more protection for the environment and include measures and aims to adapt to climate change and reduce poverty, so as a Lib Dem group we were very happy to support.

My fellow Lib Dems also managed to get two motions passed on the night. One to lobby Govnt to close a loophole allowing caravan and camping sites in woods and forests to avoid proper planning scrutiny, as highlighted by the recent Bouldner Forest controversy. The second called on more consultation with Parish Council's before major roadworks, and for roads to be opened at times when works are not taking place (common sense in my opinion).

Further motions were passed regarding Southern Water activity in Cowes, a feasibility study of limited free parking in High Streets during winter and signing up to the UK Music Live Music Charter.

Finally, I was also very pleased to see that the motion to reconfirm the Council's commitment to Equality and its flag flying policy, including showing support for Pride was passed. My feeling is that this demonstrates that the Council acknowledges the long hard fight for equality, it's support and ongoing commitment to it, and a wish to never return to a time of persecution. It was by no means a unanimous decision with, 17 For, 3 Against and 15 Abstentions, but thankfully this was enough for us to reconfirm the Council's commitment moving forward.

Environment and Community Protection

This meeting will be taking place tomorrow. I have a members' question included that requests that the possibility of support for an application for bathing beach status at The Point be added to the next agenda.

We'll discuss this topic further later on in the meeting.

The potential ban on disposable BBQs, Chinese Lanterns and balloons will return to this Committee and it looks like a targeted information campaign rather than a PSPO ban is being suggested by officers.

Thank you

Cllr Mark Rochell.