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Southend-on-Sea City Council

Executive Director (Strategy & Change):

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Dear Councillor

POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - THURSDAY, 29TH AUGUST, 2024

Please find attached the questions from members of the public, together with the respective responses from the relevant Cabinet Member(s), at the meeting of the Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 29 August 2024.

Kind regards
Stephanie Cox
Principal Democratic Services Officer

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SOUTHEND ON SEA CITY COUNCIL
Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee
29th August 2024

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Question 1. From Ms Mitchell for Cllr Gilbert (Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Major Projects)

Our inner city wards are becoming overwhelmed with HMO's both licensed and unlicensed and this is especially evident in Kursaal Ward.

While HMO's are needed in small numbers for stop gap accommodation they are rarely suitable for permanent accommodation in the way we now see.

So many landlords with such premises it seems, are not maintaining these properties or meeting their duty of care to tenants who are resident in them.

The resulting complaints and interventions are costly and the negative impact on surrounding residents often significant and damaging to the community.

Could the portfolio holder let us know the success in enforcement of HMO licence breaches over the last two years, and how they intend to locally address the regulation gap between selective licensing and small HMO's, that remain unregulated?

Response:

Over the past two years the council has successfully prosecuted an HMO landlord and associated companies on two occasions and have now successfully applied for a banning order preventing the individual from letting or managing rented properties in England.

Two other landlords have also been prosecuted. In all cases there were multiple licence condition breaches or HMO management regulation breaches.

As an alternative to prosecution the Private Sector Housing team has also imposed civil financial penalties for offences related to HMO licence condition breaches or management regulations.

Whilst smaller HMO's are currently not licensable in the City they are still subject to regulation under the Housing Act 2004. For these properties the Private Sector Housing Team are able to serve notices for disrepair or in extreme cases issue Prohibition Orders for properties with severe hazards.

Enforcement Notices Issued 2022 to 2024				Total
Notice type	2022 - 2023	2023 - 2024	2024 - 2025	
Improvement Notice	18	14	5	37
Prohibition Order	1	4	5	10
Hazard Awareness	1	1		2

Between April 2022 to the present day there were a total of:

- 37 Improvement notices served in the private rented sector for multiple housing hazards.**
- 10 Prohibition Orders were served preventing properties from being occupied until remedied.**
- For lesser hazards 2 hazard awareness notice were issued, during the same period.**

For properties that fall within the selective licensing scheme proactive inspections have identified 1,344 hazards which have been remedied.

With respect the provision of HMO properties with the current housing shortage and increases in rent for many people shared accommodation may be the only viable option. The average rent for a three-bedroom house in Southend is £1,731pcm and for a flat is £1,328pcm. Young people, students at the local university and recent graduates may find that house sharing is their only available option as the average for renting a room in a shared house costs approximately £981pcm. Correctly managed shared houses provide a solution to housing for some individuals. Enforcing in the Private Rented Sector assists with compliance for housing conditions from private landlords in the long term.

The administration is considering applying further regulation to smaller HMO's by designating additional licensing areas in the same areas as the selective licensing wards to ensure that all rented properties are fully licensed and subject to licence conditions whether they be mandatory HMO's, Additional HMO's or Selective single-family dwellings.

Question 2. From Ms Cowdery for Cllr Cowan (Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Corporate Strategy)

I am really disappointed about the frequency of pleas for help I and my colleagues receive from residents feeling excluded by the council's digital by default approach to communication and formfilling.

Having raised this issue with the council on a number of occasions and receiving assurances that no resident will be excluded and support always available, I am really disappointed in the lack of reasonable adjustments made to enable and empower all residents.

On occasions residents are signposted to Help in Hub as presumptions are made about the type of support needed and the ability to actually access this service. Additionally, this service cannot always help as they have a specific remit and I don't believe that they are funded by the council to provide IT support, where residents don't have a device, internet access, or the ability to navigate the council website, they may have a disability or a language barrier. The My Southend app no longer allows for reports of Anti-social behaviour and provided no alternative.

It does seem that the council is becoming even less inclusive as we move to even more digital processes.

Can the Portfolio holder please advise what is being done to ensure that residents are not digitally excluded and can access the right support from officers at the right time, through telephone or face to face interventions, to address their issues, rather than being signposted to a service which cannot support them?

Response:

The Council's customer service telephone team are available to support those customers who may not be digitally enabled. They will support customers with their enquiry and complete service requests on their behalf. For more lengthy requests such as applications for services, there are a series of free computers with internet access on the ground floor of the civic centre. Staff are available to support customers with such applications. The Hub is available to customers for a number of public services, not just limited to Council services.

For customers who require translation services, this is available through an interpreting service which staff are aware of and is regularly utilised.

The app for MySouthend was replaced on 2 July with a new web-based portal. Everyone who had a MySouthend account was contacted about the change. All reports, including anti-social behaviour, continue to be made through MySouthend which can be accessed from the Council's website. The website renders on mobile and tablet devices for ease of use.

Question 3. from Mr Webb to Cllr Dent (Cabinet Member for Culture, Tourism and Business)

In the new Economic Growth strategy what has been achieved and what proposals to support economic growth, regeneration and improve what specific skill base of the residents of Southend City?

Response:

Thank you for your question Mr Webb. The Economic Growth Strategy was approved by Cabinet in March under the previous administration. This administration is now developing a delivery plan which will set out what the Council, partners and businesses across the city can and will do to support and build economic growth across the city and wider economic area.

This delivery plan will be developed with cabinet members and will then come to cabinet for approval. It will include measures so that going forward, the city's performance against the delivery plan can also be measured. A key priority for me will be focus on secondary and tertiary shopping areas, as well as primary high streets, and making sure that the Strategy works for the entire city.

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