

Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee – 12th July 2018
Public Questions

Question from Mrs Grubb to Cabinet Member for Healthy Communities and Wellbeing – Cllr Lesley Salter

Question 1

“Wednesday 06th June 18 I attended a meeting at the Civic Centre, as you enter the foyer, located on the ground floor, there is a new larger enquiry help desk being constructed, when completed, the services in connection with the old enquiry desk will be transferred to the new desk. With this in mind is there any reason why the scanning services also located on the ground floor towards the rear of the building which operate between 10.00 am and 2 pm cannot be transferred to the new larger desk and extend the hours the scanning service is in operation.”

Answer

Thank you for your question.

The reception/enquiries desk on the ground floor of the Civic Centre has been moved to a more convenient and accessible location for customers. There are no plans to move the scanning service to the new reception area as this is already conveniently located by the dedicated self-serve computer area. Past experience has shown us that the benefits of providing a dedicated scanning service separate to general enquiries at the reception desk ensures that customers can be seen more quickly and receive a more efficient service. We will however continue to keep this under review and we always welcome feedback from our customers.

Question from Mrs Grubb to Cabinet Member for Healthy Communities and Wellbeing – Cllr Lesley Salter

Question 2

“I am aware, some time in the future the council plans to bring in a self scanning system operated by the customer. However until the new system is perfected and in operation, can the existing scanning service be relocated to the new enquiry desk, thereby extending the hours the scanning service is in operation? (All would be required is for the said employee who at present covers the scanning service, to cover the staff breaks of the members of staff located on the enquiry desk and to assist on the enquiry desk).”

Answer

Thank you for your question.

I have covered some of this in my response to the previous question but to re-emphasise: separating scanning from reception duties ensures a more efficient service overall for customers. You are indeed correct that we are planning to introduce a self-scanning facility which will mean that customers will be able to do this without the need to visit the Civic Centre. In the meantime Customer Service Advisors are always on hand in the dedicated self-serve computer area to support customers and to show them how to access our services on-line.

Once again I thank you for your feedback and, as previously stated, we continue to keep our services under review and to provide the best possible customer experience we can.

Question from Mr Webb to Cabinet Member for Adults and Housing – Cllr Tony Cox Question 3

“What strategies is the Conservative Council and the Police in tackling the true homelessness and the ones who are not homelessness and making our town centre and wards safer from homelessness people and helping them? There have been many publicities of the number of homelessness people in the town centre and how they are making 1) residents and visitors uncomfortable, 2) feeling intimidated, 3) threatening.”

Answer

There is a strong partnership in place between Southend Council, the police and many other local agencies and community groups to support people who are homeless.

This work includes that targeted at people who may be sleeping rough in the town centre, as well as work targeted at homeless people and those at risk of homelessness more broadly. The work includes helping people not to become homeless in the first place through assisting them to maintain tenancies, as well as helping people if they do become homeless. Both these are statutory functions of the council.

Over and above this the Council works with a broad range of organisations to support homeless people, including rough sleepers. Partners in this work include national and local charities, local church groups, businesses and other public bodies. The council has recently

been awarded over £425k additional funding for the rest of the year in order to lead even more partnership work with rough sleepers for the remainder of the 2018-19 financial year. This work will include a lot more outreach work, more access to services at all times, and more opportunities to get rough sleepers into accommodation and off the streets very quickly.

We are currently renewing our Homelessness Prevention Strategy as part of a broader housing strategy development and this will be finalised in the autumn.

Question from Mr Webb to Leader – Cllr John Lamb

Question 4

“I pay my council tax over in 10 months. Is this the same for people on benefits as many fall in arrears due to other circumstances and have to pay large sums of money they cannot afford and are threaten with court?”

If residents are on benefits why not have their payments spread over 12 months; what steps do the Conservative Council carry out collect debt in council tax from people on benefits and is this a fair process and gives them plenty of time to pay back the money?”

Answer

The council tax legislation was updated effective from 1st April 2013 to allow all council tax payers to make a request to pay council tax over a twelve monthly instalment plan.

As this is set in legislation, the Council must offer such a scheme to all residents and this is a method that 49% of the borough’s current residents choose.

Further to the legislative change, the Council also introduced a weekly instalment plan at this time to assist those on benefits who would be paying for the first time following the amendments to the localised council tax support scheme. This particular payment method was introduced to assist those receiving weekly payments via benefits to assist with budgeting, this has had limited success with only 650 residents (less than 1%) currently choosing to pay via this method.

Individuals who receive earnings or benefits still have a requirement to pay their due sum of council tax and the opportunities outlined above are there to assist individuals on low incomes. However, the council still has an obligation to collect council tax that is due and will follow its debt management collection approach of “can’t pay won’t pay”.