

Council – 5th September 2024
Councillor Questions

1. Councillor Campbell asks a question of the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cowan)

Question

What progress has been made on hiring new civil enforcement officers to tackle parking near schools?

Answer

As per the budget amendment approved at February's Full Council, an additional 3 Civil Enforcement Officers (CEO's) have been recruited. Their employment commenced on 1st August 2024 and are embedded within the service and are carrying out enforcement patrols across the city. The additional resource increases deployment and ensures there is cover later in the evenings, 7 days a week. The additional resource will also assist with activity around the city's schools, when they return from the summer break. The service will be continually monitoring the levels of non-compliance and will, where applicable, recruit an additional 2 officers as may be required.

Background

The budget amendment agreed for 2024/25 noted the following; To hire three new Civil Enforcement Officers, increasing to five depending on demand, to increase patrols around schools, resident parking zones, and council parking areas, including additional hours of operation. These Civil Enforcement Officers are expected to be in place by Q2 2024/25 ready for the return to school in September.

The cost posed within the budget amendment was £100k. Costs associated with hiring an additional 3 CEO's between 1st August to 31st March 2025 is £96k (inclusive of equipment and uniform costs)

2. Councillor Campbell asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Community Safety (Cllr Terry)

Question

What progress has the Council made on hiring new community safety officers to address anti-social behaviour?

Answer

The Council was granted additional funding as per the now administration's budget amendment at February's Full Council to strengthen the Community Safety Unit, both in terms of patrolling officers and backroom support to manage increasing administration and data management demands. The funding equated to a further 3 posts.

2 of those posts have been filled and are waiting for police vetting to be completed. The third is shortly to go out for interview. Its anticipated the new posts will be in place during the Autumn.

3. Councillor Cox asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Community Safety (Cllr Terry)

Question

Following the sword fight on our seafront and the thuggish behaviour on the 30th July, can I ask the portfolio holder if the Council received directly any prior notification of any disturbances that were likely to emerge and were these forwarded to the Police?

Answer

Both the Council's Community Safety Unit and Essex Police on Monday 29th July, received very loose intelligence of a beach party that was going to take place on the seafront the following day. This was in the form of a single flyer posted on social media.

As soon as the Council received the intel, it was immediately shared with police colleagues, via the Council's Head of Community Safety

Police investigations into the disturbance continue, and a number of arrests have since been made on persons involved with them recently appearing at Basildon Crown Court and they are due to enter pleas at a hearing set for 30 September.

4. Councillor Courtenay asks a question of the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cowan)

Question

Will the Portfolio Holder commit to publishing the latest condition survey of all roads (and footpaths) across the City, so that residents can see where their road is on the list and when it is likely to be resurfaced? If so, by when? If not, why not?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

The highways team are currently working on a 5 year programme for highway works (carriageway and footways) and are already delivering year one with 8 schemes already completed. The team are going to share year one and year two with members before the end of September and then following a final site review will share an outline programme for years three to five before calendar year end.

In respect of condition surveys, we are required to follow the recommendations of the National Codes of Practice which detail the use of both risk and condition in our assessment of schemes. In addition, we also add additional factors such as potholes, trees, previous number of works/complaints etc. Therefore, releasing condition data would not benefit the overall assessment nor provide a true or accurate picture.

However, we are currently in the process of upgrading our Highways Asset Management system with our current supplier to their new version (due for completion early 2025), and in conjunction with the improvements in MySouthend and the Front Door programme, we hope to deliver a more robust and accessible picture of our network condition, scheme assessment, inspections and reactive repairs in the future.

5. Councillor Courtenay asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Climate, Environment and Waste (Cllr Hyde)

Question

Will the Portfolio Holder please provide an update, as to the time scales, on the delivery of the upgrades and refurbishment of the Play Areas in Priory Park, Southchurch Park, Chalkwell Park, Bournes Green Park, Belfairs Park, Oakwood Park, and Friars Park?

The toddler playground in Chalkwell Park is now very tired and in desperate need of this refurbishment and therefore it should be prioritised in the schedule of works.

Answer

The funding for these works were dropped 'below the line' by the previous administration but I am pleased to have brought the work back into this year with the support of my colleagues.

We now have the Parks service working with the landscape architects Ground Control to finalise the specifications before going out to tender. Having kicked started this process as a backbencher, with my Better Play motion, I am delighted to deliver it as portfolio holder and I anticipate we will be going out to tender in the next two weeks with tenders returned approximately four weeks later.

This would result in work starting in November. At this stage there has been no decision on the specific order of works. This will be finalised with the successful contractor and communicated to members and residents at this stage.

6. Councillor Aylen asks a question of the Leader of the Council

Question

Highways refer to a government paper (Local Street Gazetteer) that dictates the names of roads, areas, etc. Very often the names are wrong or in the wrong areas. This causes confusion not only to the public but the contractors carrying out work and officers' time. When questioned the response is the Council cannot change the names or the areas. Why can't the Council have wrong information corrected?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Cllr Aylen.

175 local highway authorities across England and Wales are required by law to create and maintain a database of all the streets in their area, the Local Street Gazetteer. Data from England and Wales is brought together into a single National Street Gazetteer, which amongst other things is used by local highway authorities and utility companies to plan and coordinate street works.

The GeoPlace team verifies this data and combines it with other details sent in by bodies such as Transport for London (TfL), Welsh Government, and Network Rail. As one large dataset, this information then populates the National Street Gazetteer, which in turn informs the team at GeoPlace, who run a service called FindMyStreet, funded by the Local Government Association, that creates a publicly accessible list of publicly maintainable streets.

FindMyStreet takes its information from the National Street Gazetteer. Updates to the National Street Gazetteer can only be made by the approved highway authorities. As such, if there are details which are incorrect, please share them with our officers and the Local Street Gazetteer can be updated.

7. Councillor Aylen asks a question of the Leader of the Council

Question

At the meeting of the 7th Cllr Buck and Cllr Courtney proposed an amendment that the motion to be agreed and agreed by Cabinet at that meeting (7th September) to allow urgent recruitment of a member of staff to fill the post of a park ranger to principally police the golf course but also to carry out related duties. The amendment voted on and carried. But The motion was referred to the Cabinet meeting on 20th November 2023, which in turn referred it to the Environment Working Party for further consideration, which met on the 19th March 2024. The Working Party recommended to Cabinet to approve the motion. I now understand that the recommendations from the Working Party will be put to the Cabinet meeting in November 2024.

Given the added time delay there could be a loss of earnings of £450,000. Could I therefore ask why despite the fact at full council of the 7th of September 2023 it was agreed in the amendment to proceed with urgent recruitment of a member of staff to fill the post of a park ranger to principally police the golf course but also to carry out related duties why was it even put to a Working Party to Cabinet?

Answer

Thank you for your question, Cllr Aylen.

It was the decision of the previous administration to send the motion to a working party and it should have gone back to Cabinet for approval once the discussion had been held at the working party. I cannot speak on behalf of the previous administration or their decisions, but I apologise that your motion has been considered tardily.

This does not require a formal cabinet decision, so I have agreed with the Chief Executive and Executive Director for Environment and Place to look at improvements to the IT equipment at the golf course starter hut to help improve bookings and the collection of fees and to ensure a more visible Park Ranger is working across Belfairs and other locations with expanded responsibilities and powers on a trial basis. This negates the necessity for further delay.

8. Councillor Carthey asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and SEND (Cllr Burton)

Question

On 29th July 2024, the Government published draft legislation outlining the design, scope, and expected impact of applying 20% VAT to private school fees across the UK and removing the business rates charitable rates relief for private schools in England.

Could the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services please outline whether any assessment has been carried out by the Council regarding the impact of implementing this policy on schools in Southend-on-Sea? As well as explaining whether the Council has corresponded with the Department for Education and highlighted any points of concern?

Answer

We have undertaken an assessment of the potential impact on Southend's state funded schools should a 20% VAT be applied to private school fees. We have not corresponded with the Department for Education on this matter.

Southend has 4 independent schools; three are for children aged 4-11 years (539 students) and one for ages 4-16 (222 students). Approximately one third of these students are not residents of Southend.

Several organisations have estimated the effect of adding VAT to independent school fees if additional costs are passed to parents. A report published in the House of Lords Library on 17 May 2024 states that:

- the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates it could lead to a 3%-7% reduction in independent school pupil numbers, spread over time.
- the Adam Smith Institute said policymakers should take account of the possibility of 15–25% of pupils leaving independent schools.

Estimated impact on Southend residents based on current pupil numbers if the above figures were applied.

1. A high-range estimate of a 7% effect of adding VAT to independent school fees would be an increase of between 25-30 primary pupils and 30-35 secondary pupils across all year groups. These numbers could be accommodated within existing capacity.

2. At the high-end of the ranges suggested by the Adam Smith Institute (25%), there might be additional demand for up to 89 – 95 primary pupils and up to 30 secondary pupils across all year groups. Assuming the same context as the IFS, these numbers could be accommodated within existing capacity.

9. Councillor Cartey asks a question of the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cowan)

Question

The new Government has suggested that options will be explored for achieving economic development and regeneration of communities across the UK through local government devolution. Southend-on-Sea is in an incredibly strong position through its status as a unitary authority and established working relationships between South Essex Councils, the Local Enterprise Partnership, Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner, and other partners that contribute towards the economic and skills enrichment of our region.

Where does the Leader of the Council feel our current devolved powers could be improved to deliver on those ambitions?

Answer

Devolution discussions are in flight following an invitation from the new Government to submit an Expression of Interest by the end of this month. A deal with Government has the potential for funding and powers to be devolved at a local level. It is the last government and the new government's belief that local decisions are best known and best made by those who do business and who govern locally. However, I can share that the previous devolution deal agreed by the former leader of the council is not supported by this administration and we are actively discussing new governance models that give Southend the clearest voice, most influence, and as many opportunities as possible. At this moment we are still awaiting more detail from the Government in the new devolution framework, which will precisely define the powers and flexibilities available to areas entering into an agreement.

In line with the ambitions of our Economic Growth Strategy for Southend, our intention would be that we are able to continue to identify economic development, regeneration and skills projects that we are then able to bid into a centralised and more local funding pot for, maximising the benefit and positive outcomes for residents and businesses alike.

10. Councillor Warren asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Community Safety (Cllr Terry)

Question

Following the recent violence on the High Street and Seafront, will the Administration now commit to updating the PSPO for these areas to include a ban on face coverings, with exemptions for those worn for medical or religious reasons?

Answer

There is no statutory legislation in place that the Council or Police can employ to ban face masks in public places. We would therefore come under significant challenge if we were to 'go it alone' and place such a ban in the PSPO prohibitions from human rights groups.

There are other powers in place (such as gang injunction orders) that can prevent an individual from wearing a mask in a public place if that individual is / has been associated with criminal activity.

The Leader and I, at the last council meeting, gave assurances that we would look into the legalities of such a ban and we remain committed to that. The case for face mask bans have accumulated an increase in commentary across the UK recently, and further investigation is required to understand where, how and if, other localities have deployed such in their town centres. And specifically, how they enforce against such a prohibition. This would include consultation with police colleagues.

In previous debates in this chamber it was alleged that the "BID wants a face mask ban". I attended a well-attended BID panel meeting on the 13th August to discuss face masks which included senior Essex Police and CSU representation. The BID members do not want a face mask ban, they feel a face mask ban is fraught with problems and unanimously do not want either a voluntary ban, or an enforced ban.

11. Councillor Longstaff asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Climate, Environment and Waste (Cllr Hyde)

Question

At full Council in September 2023 I moved a motion that sought to preserve and enhance Southend's urban tree canopy cover.

The motion was well received and supported by the majority of this chamber and duly made it to Cabinet. Unfortunately, it languished there and was not supported by the previous administration. Subsequently, Southend's Tree Canopy Cover continues to be depleted without adequate replacements.

At a recent Place Scrutiny Committee former Councillor, Tricia Cowdry also asked a question: why hasn't the motion been implemented?

The response from the current portfolio holder for the Environment was inconclusive.

Will this administration commit to the motion and further its implementation in a phased approach and be willing to work with myself and other expert academics in implementing the motion and collaborating on a university Knowledge transfer partnership, KPI, to get started on the methodology toolbox?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

This administration is committed to maximising the city's tree canopy. My approach will be to get a better grip on the current health status of our trees and prevention of the problems leading them to be cut. Maximising levels of regular inspections and taking a strategic look at the specific tree diseases (soil-borne and air-borne) we are struggling with, and to investigate if there are adaptations to our maintenance approaches to reduce the spread or impact of these all of which will be supported by an appropriate management tool. This approach will not save every tree, but I am confident it will reduce the rate at which we currently fell mature trees and I look forward to working with you on this matter.

12. Councillor Longstaff asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Planning, Housing and the Local Plan (Cllr A Jones)

Question

I think it is really important that Southend encourages cycling and improves on all forms of helping residents to take to the saddle.

However, I can't help but notice the recently installed cycle shelters that have cropped up around the city recently. Most notable to me are the ones conspicuously placed outside the Victorian Tudor-Revival public toilets at Chalkwell Park and the one outside the Saltwater Cafe on Chalkwell Promenade.

With their garish colours I'm sure members of the chamber would agree that they are aesthetically unsightly, poorly positioned and incongruous to the street scene.

Could I ask please how these were commissioned and whether planning approval, and members approval, were sought and if not, should they not be removed?

Answer

The new cycle shelters that have been installed across the city are a response to the active travel survey that took place in 2021 that sought views of the residents, businesses, and organisations on proposals to develop walking and cycling facilities and infrastructure across Southend-on-Sea. Prior to this survey it had been highlighted that safe and secure cycle parking was required by current and new cyclists to give them the security of using their cycles for journeys around the city. The locations of these cycle shelters were also consulted on in the same survey.

Procurement of the shelters has been made possible through Tranche 2 of the Department for Transport's Active Travel Fund awarded to the council in 2022, ward councillors have been engaged throughout the process regarding location and design, with the result that they have been installed in seven locations between Shoebury in the east and Belfairs to the west. They do not require planning permission and were installed under permitted development as the shelters does not exceed 4 metres in height and 200 cubic metres in volume.

The cycle shelters include green roofs to assist with the council's climate resilience and are consistent with Southend-on-Sea branding guidelines.