

Council – 17th October 2024

Public Questions

1. Question from Ms Mitchell to the Cabinet Member for Climate, Environment and Waste (Cllr Hyde)

Question

Woodgrange Estate has lots of resident young families, but a play space not fit for purpose. It has splintering wood, rusting apparatus and uninspiring play equipment. Much of the flooring is inappropriate. Several parents say it hasn't changed since they were kids.

Families in close proximity want to use the space with their children and have the equipment replaced with a variety of good quality options for child development. A great addition would be a family picnic area and covered space to make it more family orientated and more frequently used.

The street community art on entrance to the play area is an indication of the neglect of this space, crumbling away since installation in 2012.

How does the portfolio holder intend to help families and children achieve a play space fit for purpose, making better use of the large open area, supporting learning through play and increasing civic pride?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

Woodgrange Estate is part of Estuary's housing portfolio in the city. Therefore, improvements to the play equipment within the estate fall outside of the remit of the council. The council is currently working on a playground improvement programme and would be happy to share learnings with Estuary if they consider that would be helpful.

2. Question from Ms Mitchell to the Cabinet Member for Social Care and Healthier Communities (Cllr Sadza)

Question

On 31st January 2023 a report at People Scrutiny recommended Southend bring Mental Health Social Work back in house at City Council.

The benefits included putting service users, family and carers at the forefront of the teams work, having better trained social care focussed practitioners, improved clarity around strengths based approaches, regular reviews, and strengthened multi agency working.

The Director of Adult Social Services was to proceed serving notice on the s75 agreement with EPUT, and manage transition of Mental Health Social Work back to council.

An Independent consultant's report had instigated the recommendations that as I recall were supported cross party to serve notice on the s75 agreement, and achieve better outcomes.

Please could the portfolio holder confirm that notice was served, what stage of transition the department has reached in order to deliver improved training, co-production and putting service users at the forefront of mental health social work?

Answer

The Executive Director/DASS informed Paul Scott, CEO EPUT, of our intention to serve notice in December 2022 and subsequently served notice following the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee in January 2023. We have worked closely with our colleagues in EPUT to plan the move of all social care colleagues from EPUT Mental Health Services to the council.

A Memorandum of Understanding was developed and agreed which outlines the collaboration between EPUT and ASC following the move. Colleagues returned to the council on the 20th of November 2023. Those who joined the council have been offered a tailored training, delivered by the Social Care Institute for excellence (SCIE).

This has helped to strengthen the focus on social care priorities and gave a good foundation for the work in a Local Authority. Regular meetings between managers from EPUT and SCC are ensuring that we maintain a good relationship between organisations. This is in the best interest of our residents. Almost a year after the transfer we see a much-improved social care offer for residents with Mental Health presentations. We are currently in the process of reviewing all residents receiving social care services to ensure that their support meets their social care needs.

The move also included the AMHP service. (Approved Mental Health Practitioners). This part of the service continues to work effectively.

3. Question from Ms Cowdrey to the Cabinet Member for Housing Planning and the Local Plan (Cllr Anne Jones)

Question

In June we were advised that a new local plan is being prepared to review and update the out of date adopted development plan. The Shoeburyness ward sites identified for development back in 2021, include the Old Hingar playing field and the Elm road field, both designated for public use. Also earmarked are our local care homes, Great Mead and Longmans.

Since its inception, the plan has seen a number of changes in staff and we're unlikely to see a significant change in administration until the elections in 2026, when the Local Plan is due to be published. This is of concern given the current government appetite for building on green belt and green spaces.

Can the cabinet member advise when we will see the results of the 2021 consultation and when the preferred approach consultation, due this year, will commence, as the final consultation is due in 2025?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

The Government attaches great importance to Green Belts. National planning policy is clear that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified through the preparation or updating of plans. The Local Plan 'Refining the Plan Options' consultation in 2021 included all potential development sites promoted to the local planning authority, including those identified in the question, in order to gain a better understanding of the development potential in the City and to generate public feedback. However, this is very different to them being allocated for development and at this time no Council decision has been made on redeveloping these sites.

Feedback from the 2021 consultation will inform the preparation and Council decision to agree the next stage of the Local Plan, a Preferred Approach document. This will include an updated list of potential development sites. The Local Plan Preferred Approach will then be subject to further consultation. This is expected to take place next year, followed by publication of the final draft plan for comment, and subsequent submission for examination in 2026. A Consultation Report will be published alongside the Local Plan Preferred Approach consultation detailing the approach and findings of the 2021 consultation.

4. Question from Ms Cowdrey to the Cabinet Member for Housing Planning and the Local Plan (Cllr Anne Jones)

Question

Given the current appetite for building on other than brown belt land, residents in Shoeburyness would like to have a better understanding of the risks to public land, not only the sites at the old Hinguar School Playing Field and Elm Road field but also our precious greensward at East Beach. We are currently seeing concerning works such as road widening and other clearance of the Greensward which, to some, would appear a precursor to development.

Can the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing please provide some clarity about the works being taken at East Beach and its Greensward, a timeline for the completion of works to the beach steps, ramp and platform and an assurance that this land is not being considered for development in any other way, including for car parking, homes or otherwise?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

The local and national planning policy establishes a sequential approach to development, prioritising the use of brownfield sites and under-utilised land. Data from 2001 to 2021 shows 94% of new dwellings in Southend were built on such land.

The new local plan should, as a minimum, meet identified development needs. Local planning authorities must understand local land availability. The 'Refining the Plan Options' consultation sought feedback on all sites promoted during the Local Plan preparation process.

This consultation included the former Hinguar School playing field at George Street and land at Elm Road. However, inclusion in the consultation does not necessarily mean these sites will be allocated for development in the final plan. Feedback from the 2021 consultation will inform the next stage of the local plan, a preferred approach document, for further consultation.

The 2021 local plan also sought views on maintaining the green space at East Beach as Protected Greenspace, aside from the former Hinguar School playing field, which is currently fenced off.

There is no proposal to widen the road at East Beach. Instead, it is proposed that the spine road becomes shared space for cycles, occasional waste collections, and seasonal access for the Shoebury Waterman Group's boat lifting equipment.

These proposed works are expected to provide significant inclusive benefits for residents and visitors to East Beach.

5. Question from Mr Webb to the Cabinet Member for Climate, Environment and Waste (Cllr Hyde)

Question

From 2013 to 2024 I have checked all the roads in the Chalkwell, Westborough and Prittlewell wards. Over 11 years I have reported over 4,000 reports. The most significant has been fly tipping. I have worked with Veolia over the past 8 years in tackling hotspot areas in these wards. In 2021, no fly tipping fines were issued. When I report fly tipping it is just collected but not checked for evidence.

A Veolia employee told me that the evidence is given to the Council but they do not act upon it. We need to act on evidence from Veolia and add on mysouthend an option to add evidence of fly tipping.

What steps and strategies will be put into place to tackle fly tipping and give more fines as this will be a warning to fly tippers that Southend Council is getting tougher on the crime of fly tipping?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

I agree that there must be a combination of actions to tackle flytipping, with a good mix of 'softer' options like education and engagement, but also tougher action when that does not work. Our officers continue to do brilliant work with the softer options, but they and I recognise we need to do more on the enforcement. That is why I worked cross-chamber with Cllr Campbell last year to support his fly-tipping motion. The key aspect I brought to that motion was improving the quality of our evidence, as this must meet the criminal standard of proof to be able to legally fine and prosecute. Specifically, it must show that the person receiving the fine was the perpetrator beyond reasonable doubt.

Therefore, I have been working with our waste team and contractors to pilot the use of cameras in hot spots for this purpose. I am also working with officers to understand if and how we can also utilise video imagery directed submitted by residents. More broadly, we are introducing a new enforcement project with SEPS which will address low level fly tipping, dog fouling littering and graffiti. This is due to be rolled out by the end of November 2024.

6. Question from Mr Webb to the Cabinet Member for Climate, Environment and Waste (Cllr Hyde) **Question**

What strategies will be put into steps with Veolia December to April and the new contractor from 5th April, to increase the tonnes of recycled of pink, garden, food but reduce the black bags?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

Officers continue to work closely with Veolia on a range of ongoing communication campaigns to minimise black sack waste and maximise food and recycled waste.

Once onboarded the new waste contractor will be partnering with the council on a range of activities and campaigns to support and promote improved recycling across the city. The council website will continue to be updated regularly to keep residents informed.

7. Question from Mr Harp to the Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets and Investment (Cllr Collins)

Question

Would the Portfolio Holder update the residents in the St Luke's Ward in the vicinity of the Central Avenue/North Avenue corridor of any current progress being made towards the restoration of the route serving the area withdrawn in February 2023 prioritised at the Local Bus Forum meeting in September 2023 but not referenced at the latest meeting in September 2024?

This lack of service is causing those residents without access to private cars and unable to walk considerable distance hardship in connecting with the City centre and the Hospital by being forced to use taxis for these trips at a cost of £20-30 for each return trip.

This in a ward which is one of the most deprived in the City and has even further seen the only alternative route the number 6, whilst being extended to Garon Park, which is very welcome, has had the service reduced by 33%.

Answer

Thank you for your question.

The Council is pleased to announce that it has secured agreement with Stephenson's to provide a new hourly circular bus service 62, connecting Central Avenue to and from the City Centre, running on Monday to Friday mornings and early afternoons from Monday 28th October 2024. This will operate using funds from the DfT (BSIP Phase 2). The bus will run from the Travel Centre along Southchurch Road up Bournemouth Park Road to Central Avenue, and then along Central Avenue to the junction with Hamstel Road, returning to the Travel Centre via Hamstel Road and Southchurch Road. Transferring to other buses at the City Centre should enable easy journeys to and from the Hospital.

Timetables will be shown on the Stephenson's website.

8. Question from Mr George to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cowan)

Question

Could the Leader of the Council (given his comments on social media about protecting the most vulnerable in our society) and the fact that Labour run Councils in Basildon and Thurrock intend to provide funds for some of those affected by the removal of the Winter Fuel Allowance let us know what additional measures his administration intend to undertake to mitigate the impact on many of Southend's own pensioners as a result of this change in policy by the government?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

Over three weeks ago, I announced that the Council has ringfenced £250,000 of the extended Household Support Fund for pensioners – The Southend Pensioner Support Initiative.

This administration has also introduced a new process to identify pensioners who are entitled to pension credit but not claiming. So far, we have identified 715 residents who will be helped to make their pension credit claim and those in receipt of Pension Credit will continue to receive Winter Fuel Payments. They will also be entitled to apply for our Southend Pensioner Support Initiative through the Household Support Fund if they require further support.

In addition, the council is partnering with Citizens Advice Southend and the Southend Emergency Fund to distribute some of the Household Support Fund to local charities and support groups, helping vulnerable residents including pensioners. By working with trusted local organisations, the Council ensures that the support reaches a broad cross-section of the community.

These are just some of the proactive things this administration is doing to support vulnerable residents.

9. Question from Mr George to the Cabinet Member for Climate, Environment and Waste (Cllr Hyde)

Question

Could the Portfolio Holder for Climate, Environment and Waste (given her comments on social media about how passionate she is about children's playgrounds) and the fact that the previous Labour led administration in 2022 set aside £1 million for playground improvements provide us with an update on the actual progress that has been made in this area over the last 18 months?

Answer

As a newly elected backbench councillor in 2022, I was pleased to present my first motion, Better Play, to this chamber on 20th October 2022. This called for investment to modernise our playgrounds, and to especially enhance accessibility. I am hugely thankful to the former portfolio holder at that time, Cllr Mulronev, who shared my passion and put in the hard work at cabinet to secure investment into our play spaces.

Unfortunately, this project was delayed by the previous administration and the severe cuts to the parks department made by the previous administration has limited the remaining team's capacity to progress with the final design post the public consultation in May.

However, investing in the children of this city remains a key priority of this administration and I have been working closely with officers to get this project back up to speed. Over the summer the team have been reviewing the plans post the consultation and conducting the final site surveys. I am pleased to say we intend to go out to procurement this month, with works to start early 2025.

10. Question from Mr Gittus to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cowan)

Question

Speeding is a massive problem on Marine Parade in Leigh. It is a long stretch of straight road, and I have witnessed a number of near-misses due to excess speed. Will the Portfolio Holder finally commit to looking at speed reduction measures, such as chicanes, to break up the length of road and make it much safer for residents and users of the Marine Gardens?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

We fully appreciate residents' concerns with speeding across the city and actively deploy a regular programme of speed monitoring surveys and work with Community Speed Watch, who are managed by Essex County Fire and Rescue Service; this road is one of their approved sites for monitoring.

Our most recent speed monitoring information for this road didn't show any particular concerns, however, as it has been some time since the last test, we have requested that this road be added to our programme for speed monitoring surveys so we can assess if there has been any increase in the levels of speed being measured.

It should be noted that any specific concerns around speeding vehicles should be sent to Essex Police for further investigation. Based on the current results and without yet knowing the results of the proposed survey, we would not be undertaking any further action at this time.

11. Question from Ms Ekins to the Cabinet Member for Climate, Environment and Waste (Cllr Hyde)

Question

Everyone knows how vital bees and other pollinators are to human survival, with almost 90% of the world's wild plants depending on animal pollination*. A recent study found that 17 species of bee have become locally extinct from the East of England, a further 25 other species are threatened and 31 are of conservation concern**. The biggest issue affecting most pollinators is the loss of suitable habitat^, and with 97% of flower-rich meadows having been lost since the 1930s**, it's no wonder our pollinators are in such decline.

Many UK councils have had success with 'living roof' bus stops, creating a pollinator transit network amongst the concrete city sprawl. They require little maintenance beyond a twice-yearly weed and trim and even contribute to offsetting the urban heat island effect.

Can the Council commit to installing living roof bus stops when erecting new and replacing existing stops across the city?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

The Council has experience of installing a 'living roof' bus shelter, at The Bell junction on the Rochford Road southbound carriageway, just north of 'The Bell' public house. The shelter was installed as part of The Bell junction improvement works.

We continue to assess the desirability of using 'living roof' bus stops whenever a bus shelter needs replacement or a new bus shelter is required. This assessment will evaluate not only relative costs (compared with standard bus shelters), but also the extent to which the adjoining area has some vegetation which would facilitate the transit of bees to and from a 'living roof' bus stop.

We have also installed living roofs on other assets such as the secure cycle store at the High Street end of London Road, on the Launchpad at Airport Business Park: Southend, Priory Park Bowls Pavilion, the new Nursery at Centurion Close and the garden store at the retrofit house on Juniper Road to give a few examples.

The officer team is committed to incorporating living elements into designs where this presents a good solution and also actively explores grant opportunities to support such works.

12. Question from Ms Ekins to the Cabinet Member for Climate, Environment and Waste (Cllr Hyde)

Question

In September, residents in Leigh and Kursaal wards were faced with signs erected on trees incorrectly stating 'felling', causing unnecessary panic in the community. Will the Portfolio Holder provide an update as to why this happened, and what they are doing to prevent this error happening again?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

On this occasion a human error was made when completing the Traffic Order notice for tree works on Leigh Hall Road. These notices are required wherever roads have temporary road restrictions associated with felling or maintenance works. Unfortunately, this traffic notice incorrectly used the term 'felling' rather than 'maintenance'. This was swiftly rectified once discovered. Extra checks will be made in future to ensure the traffic notices distinguish between felling and maintenance works correctly.

Where trees are to be felled, they would instead have a Tree Removal Notice placed on them, which details the reasons for removal and provides contact details for the council to raise any concerns.