

Public Document Pack

Southend-on-Sea City Council

Legal & Democratic Services

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04 April 2022

THE COUNCIL - THURSDAY, 24TH MARCH, 2022 SUPPLEMENTARY PACK – PUBLIC AND COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Please find enclosed, for consideration at the next meeting of the Council taking place on Thursday, 24th March, 2022, the following report(s) that were unavailable when the agenda was printed.

Agenda No Item

4 Questions from Members of the Public (Pages 1 - 10)

Questions and Answers sheet attached

5 Questions from Members of the Council (Pages 11 - 18)

Questions and Answers sheet attached

Robert Harris
Principal Democratic Services

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Public Questions

(1) **Question from Mr Vessey-Miller to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture, Tourism and Planning (Cllr Mulrone)**

Question

Preamble (not to be read)

Since the Council declared a Climate Emergency back in 2019, the Council has been taking small but necessary steps to ensuring that the city reaches Carbon Neutrality by 2030; a direction welcomed by the city's environmental groups.

As Councillors will be aware, one of the biggest Carbon emissions for the city are from the sector of transport. Residents know full well the traffic chaos the city suffers already, and this worsening in congestion is only set to increase as the city's population grows. With this worsening congestion comes worsening carbon emissions and as a further consequence, worsening air quality. This issue is already such to the extent that several of the city's AQMA's have already recorded illegally unsafe levels of pollutants, near to schools and residential areas.

Whilst Electric Vehicles are not exclusively the solution to these problems, they are a required step in rapidly decarbonising transit, and will be a core component to the city achieving its 2030 Carbon goals. Many residents are already investing in EVs, and that trend is set to continue over the coming years with new legislation preventing the sale of new internal combustion vehicles from 2030.

In this light, the council needs to urgently review the existing EV charging infrastructure across the city. Currently, there are 10 publicly accessible charging locations in operation, facilitating just 22 EVs charging at any one time.

Of the six public PodPoint sites managed by the council, just two are working, with four whole sites currently inoperative. This is simply insufficient to facilitate this rising EV ownership across the city.

Just this week, CarGuide.co.uk ranked Southend-on-Sea as the third worst place in the country to own an EV, as it has only 9.8 charging points per 100,000 people. Compare and contrast that to Milton Keynes, with 137.3 charging points per 100,000 people, and the problem is obvious.

The large majority of Southend's residents don't have access to off-street parking to facilitate charging at home, and the business community cannot be relied upon exclusively to install the required points on their own property. As such, council-operated public charging infrastructure will be vital in enabling this electrification, especially in residential areas.

Question

Can the portfolio holder outline how the Council intends to meet the growing demand for public EV charging points, and further, what steps the council are taking to incorporate new EV charging points into street furniture on residential roads across the city?

Answer

Electric vehicles are part of the council's transport decarbonisation programme, and wider modal shift to active modes of travel. The council will be taking an evidence-based approach to the roll out of appropriate EV charging infrastructure in optimal locations that aligns and integrates with the forthcoming Local Plan and Local Transport Plan 4. A feasibility study will shortly be undertaken to understand the infrastructure challenges that the city face which includes disparate sub-station coverage and property adjacent street furniture.

On completion of the feasibility study, officers will be able to establish a criteria that will maximise charging points for residents within the structural parameters of the city, taking a test and trial approach which will take place in parallel to resident engagement and discussions with UKPN to establish a medium-term plan for improving network infrastructure.

Electric vehicles are not the silver bullet, the aim of the council is not to replace combustion engine journeys with an equal number of electric vehicle journeys, but to move to a sustainable transport system where vehicle journeys are replaced by walking, cycling and public transport where possible, and network congestion is minimised.

(2) **Question from Mr Vessey-Miller to Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)**

Question

Preamble (not to be read)

The results of a survey conducted by the Green Party in Southend in 2021 found that only 10% of respondents thought that the council sufficiently prioritises cycling.

86% of respondents felt that bike theft is an issue of concern in Southend, and that the Police and Council are not doing enough to tackle bike theft across the town. 63% of people we asked said that they would not feel comfortable locking up their bicycle in town or at train stations and said they would be concerned that their bike would not be safe if left unattended. A further 19% of people said they had previously been a victim of bike theft in Southend.

A staggering 95.7% of respondents said the cycling infrastructure across Southend was inadequate, with 84.95% saying they would not feel comfortable with cycling with their children or younger members of their family across Southend. Only 7.5% of responders said they regularly cycle to school with their children. This demonstrates that the council are not doing enough at present to safeguard and prioritise cycling.

The benefits of cycling are vast; mental and physical wellbeing benefits are well-documented, and the average cyclist isn't just better on Carbon emissions, but far better on our streets in terms of public space, congestion, air pollution, and road traffic accidents. If Southend is to meet its imperative climate goals, encouraging cycling amongst residents should be very high on that agenda.

In the Full Council meeting of 10th March, the Portfolio Holder announced that of the £741,600 Active Travel Fund, just £241,000 is to be spent on cycling infrastructure across the city, with a large proportion of that to be spent on yet another expensive and needless public consultation on an A13 'painted bike lane' scheme.

Contrast that to the council's commitment to spending £10million per annum for another 18 years on Highways investments, and the town's cyclists are again wondering which road users the council is prioritising in its investments. Given the unprecedented urgency of the climate emergency, Cycling receiving a figure 41 times lower than that of car users would be scandalous. It continues to signal a now outdated assumption that car use should be the default transit method for every resident in Southend. This is not at all compatible with your stated climate and Active Travel goals.

Question

Can the Portfolio Holder outline how much of the £10million annual Highways Budget is ring-fenced for improvements to the city's cycling infrastructure, and what new safe and segregated cycle routes and infrastructure are currently being implemented by the authority?

Answer

The authority receives money from a number of sources. For active travel interventions has received two main funds from central government.

The Secretary of State for Transport awarded £309k for Tranche 1 of the active Travel Fund. This fund supported producing cycling and walking facilities. In particular, Southend Council created four pilot Schools Streets and one pilot CCTV School Keep Clear enforcement scheme.

Tranche 2 of the same fund awarded £741.6k and will support the creation of:

- Holistic Network Wide Cycle Audit & Master Planning of A13 Active Travel Corridor;

- Prittlebrook Greenway Lighting and Connectivity Improvements;
- A further roll out of the School Streets initiative;
- Cycling Improvements to the Public Realm - Secure cycle parking, electric bike charging & repair stations.

In addition to this, the Local Transport Plan Grant supports sustainable transport projects and has been used to co-fund the London Road works that included the installation of secure cycle parking.

(3) Question from Ms Lydia Hyde to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)

Question

Congestion along Priory Crescent, Manners Way, eastbound Prince Avenue and Victoria Avenue could be greatly reduced simply by improving the flow and movement of traffic around Cuckoo Corner roundabout. Presently, any build up on Priory Crescent, which already has pressures from a 2 into 1 lane reduction, a pedestrian crossing near the hospice and vehicles seeking to enter and exit the Aldi supermarket car park, almost immediately leads to congestion on Manners Way, Prince Avenue and Victoria Avenue as the roundabout becomes completely blocked. Last year, I asked the council to investigate installing a box junction on the Cuckoo Corner roundabout at the bottom of Manners Way to allow the traffic to flow and received the welcome response that it would be investigated.

Can the portfolio holder please give me an update on the outcome of these investigations and if and when residents can expect this box junction to be installed?

Answer

The traffic signals at Cuckoo Corner are linked to the neighbouring junctions and are synchronised to provide the optimum performance. Our data shows that adding a yellow box would not improve the situation. We will continue to monitor this junction and consider any physical interventions as appropriate.

(4) Question from Ms Lydia Hyde to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture, Tourism and Planning (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

The council's announcement that it is phasing out the use of glyphosate weedkillers has been widely welcomed as a positive move and a benefit to biodiversity in our city. However, it is not immediately apparent if this phasing out refers only to our parks and open spaces or also applies to our footpaths and pavements.

Could the portfolio holder please confirm if the use of glyphosate is being completely phased out and if so, when we can expect to see this no longer used on our footpaths and pavements?

Answer

The Council is looking to reduce its use of glyphosate significantly. We have ceased application in all Children's play areas from April 2022, as well as in the Green Flag Parks. From April 2022, we will be looking at alternatives in controlling weeds and trialling these for 12 months. This does not apply to footways and footpaths at this moment in time but when we have found a viable alternative solution, that is where we are heading.

(5) Question from Mr Kevin Ryan to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture, Tourism and Planning (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

Following on-going instances of flooding in underpasses in Eagle Way, Shoeburyness, effecting children's safe routes to local primary schools can I ask the portfolio holder what steps are being taken to address not only this but the wider issues in relation to water drainage and flood plains encouraged by the Conservative Government's Boris Builds Better policy that places pressures on local authorities in respect of fulling unrealistic targets on housing developments, including ,the detrimental environmental effects of building on flood plains and the effects this will have across our City, especially in Shoeburyness?

Answer

The underpass at Eagle Way flooded because a surface water pump failed. The asset is scheduled for repair however we do not yet have a confirmed date for this work.

The National Planning Policy Framework sets strict tests to protect people and property from flooding which all local planning authorities are expected to follow when determining planning applications.

Southend Council scrutinises all applications very closely and thoroughly under the terms of this legislation.

If tests are not met, then national policy is clear, a new development should not be allowed.

(6) Question from Mr Kevin Ryan to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health Integration (Cllr Nevin)

Question

Pensioners have made great personal sacrifices over the last two years, especially in terms of their liberty and movement. However, with an opening up of society and a return to some degree of post pandemic normality could the Cabinet member explain what provisions are being made by the Council to address the needs of our aging population and what support is available for their general health and mental wellbeing to combat loneliness, particularly for the most vulnerable of our senior citizens?

Answer

We want to ensure older people are supported to stay healthy and active and we are working with both informal and formal care services to achieve this.

Community support from the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise sector (VCSE) for older people in Southend is positive and thriving, such as Age Concern Southend, Folk Like Us, Southend United, Trust Links, Metal, Southend Adult Community

College and many churches across the City who offer a range of welcoming events and clubs where people can socialise, join in with support and leisure and take part in activities to stay connected to their community. We are developing skills assistance for digital training to support older people who may be digitally excluded.

There is an extensive Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) offer in Southend with Livewell Southend acting as the main IAG online service for the Borough and Citizen Advice Southend (CAS) Citizens Advice Southend, South Essex Advocacy Service who also offer face to face and outreach Information Advice and Guidance in the community. Active Southend have an Activities, Clubs, Sports map, accessible through the Live Well website. The Dementia Community Support Team based within Southend City Council are also in place to help families through the process connecting people together, providing activities and encouraging peer support.

We commission a service to support Southend carers through Carers First, there is also a Southend Carers service.

Support to help people to stay fit and healthy is provided via NHS Health Checks, social prescribers in the community, sport and exercise programmes and strength and balance classes to try to prevent the risk of falls or help someone recover after a fall. We commission a wellbeing programme through Everyone Health which includes help with weight loss, health trainers and a falls prevention programme. There are also other organisations such as Active Life, Yoga4all and some churches where exercise classes are offered for older people.

Day services are becoming more opportunity led still focusing on the social element but also thinking more about what people want to achieve and how those can be met ensuring our older generation feel they can contribute to society and are valued. Alongside this we are developing opportunities with partners for local community hubs to deliver activities to avoid isolation

Most older people who need adult social care services receive homecare or care provided in their own home through 'reablement', which means that a person is supported to recover and relearn to carry out their daily activities themselves, in some cases with the help of equipment or assistive technology devices, to get people back to the independence they had enjoyed prior to

either a hospital stay or ill health. Some people receive help to remain in their own home through aids and adaptations e.g., accessibility ramps, grab rails, level access wet rooms.

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Councillor Questions

(1) **Question from Councillor K Evans to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)**

Question

Could the cabinet member confirm when the weekend charges in the pay and display bays within the Hospital Area Resident Parking (Zone H) were introduced?

Answer

The weekend charges in the pay and display bays within the Hospital Area Resident Parking (Zone H) were introduced in April 2021.

(2) **Question from Councillor K Evans to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)**

Question

Could the cabinet member confirm if there are financial penalty clauses which can be levied in respect of overruns and defects with regard to street works inspections?

Answer

The highway authority will issue Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN's) for reinstatement defects and signing, lighting and guarding inadequacies. There are also charges for over running the agreed duration of a permit. Since April 2021 there have been 1272 defects issued to utilities totalling £51,615.00 in charges, 2041 FPN's issued totalling £168,040.00, 158 over runs totalling £49,150.00 and a further estimated £57,000.00 of over runs yet to be agreed.

The highway authority also complete agreed sample inspections for the year creating £49,940.00 in fees.

(3) Question from Councillor M Berry to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Gilbert)

Question

Please can you give an as accurate as possible indication of the financial costs to the Council of arranging and running an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council, such as the one convened on 17th February?

I appreciate that the attendance of Councillors costs nothing apart from our time, but given that there are costs in terms of preparation and attendance for the Chief Executive, Borough Solicitor and other senior Council Officers, staff time and printing costs in arranging the agenda and distributing papers, cleaning the room and sanitising the desks before and afterwards and various ancillary expenses I feel that Members of the Council and members of the public should be aware of the extent of those.

Answer

Under staff costs, 'attendance at committees' is a requirement of the role for most council officers. The council operates a Flexi Policy for staff to manage their working pattern to balance the demands of their role with a work-life balance. There is no overtime payment in operation, so no additional costs. In some cases, flexi time is taken back.

In relation to the specific attendance at the Extraordinary Meeting of the Council on 17 February 2022, the council staff present included:

- Chief Executive
- Executive Director (Legal and Democratic Services)
- Democratic Services support staff
- Communications staff
- ICT/Webcast support staff
- Facilities Management staff

Based on a 4-hour period, the cost of the above people resources is a total of £1061.52.

It is worth highlighting that staff typically manage a workload during the day and where there is an unusually high demand of committee meetings, including the Extraordinary Meeting of the Council on 17 February 2022, the lead-in time to prepare for the meetings and the flexi time taken back by some officers can lead to service pressures.

(4) Question from Councillor M Berry to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Gilbert)

Question

Please can you give information on the policy for providing access to council services and application/report forms for people who are unable to use computers or other internet-enabled devices for one reason or another?

Several instances have been brought to my attention of residents being told by council staff that the service they need to use can only be accessed online. While I appreciate that organisations such as the Hub can assist in many cases, or I and other councillors can take our laptops round to the residents and fill in the forms for them, that is far from ideal. A lot of residents would much rather not disclose their personal and financial information to volunteers or other third parties, and in any case what they really want is the simplicity and confidentiality of a paper form they can take their time over and post to the council.

Answer

We absolutely need to support people who are digitally uncertain or excluded and addressing that fully is a long-term approach which is being addressed via social value, connectivity strategies, education and training, the replacement of the MySouthend platform, and other programs and workstreams.

In the shorter term, we have taken some actions that do address residents access and ability to access forms:

- For residents who are challenged with equipment, there are computers called kiosks available in the Civic and libraries which residents can use. We recently upgraded these to ensure that they are secure for residents. Support for residents on using these is available at these sites.
- If a user is unable to use the MySouthend digital form, they are able to call the contact centre, who will guide them through the form they are trying to submit - either mirroring their actions onscreen to guide or customer services can submit the form on the customers behalf. If this is not acceptable to some residents and the paper form can be mailed to them for them to complete and send back.
- As part of the quick wins promised in October 2021 for the MySouthend replacement project, we have updated the language and requirements of the forms on MySouthend to make them easier to understand and complete. At the same time the team have been working through these to make them available in printed form.

(5) Question from Councillor D Garne to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Gilbert)

Question

The new corporate branding and coat of arms appear to contain no words of the traditional heraldic type or a modern version thereof.

Has no consideration been given to these possibilities and are suggestions welcomed?

Answer

I believe that Cllr Garne is referring to the modern coat of arms concept, one of four concepts discussed at Cabinet on 14 March and then Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 16 March. The matter has been referred back to Cabinet so unfortunately the public and wider engagement planned will not now take place until after the election.

As I stated at Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 16 March, I will be happy to listen to suggestions and ideas as part of the engagement process.

It is important to emphasise that the traditional coat of arms will not be replaced or altered in any way and will continue to be retained for appropriate civic occasions as usual.

(6) Question from Councillor M Dent to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)

Question

Could the cabinet member please detail what review and improvement works are taking place regarding levels of street lighting across the city?

Answer

The 2022/23 Annual Street Lighting 'Infill Programme' is yet to be finalised and will also be subject to be ability to obtain the required materials. Steel was in short supply last financial year and the number of columns available to purchase was dramatically reduced.

A list of requests for increases to street lighting is maintained. All requests received are surveyed by an engineer, the lowest lit areas/those with the largest spacing between columns are then prioritised first.

(7) Question from Councillor Dent to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Gilbert)

Question

Could the Leader of the Council please tell me what, if any, measures are currently in place to mitigate Southend Councillors being forced to miss Council meetings due to contracting COVID-19?

Answer

Under the Coronavirus Act 2020, Remote Meeting Regulations were made to enable local authorities to hold meetings remotely to 7th May 2021. The Regulations ceased to be in force from that date and local authorities had to revert to in person meetings for Council, Cabinet, committees and sub-committees.

The Government has consistently maintained that primary legislation is required to change the law and have cited a lack of parliamentary time as a reason for not bringing forward the necessary legislation. Various local authority organisations have lobbied the Government to change the law to allow remote meetings to take place, not only because of the effect of Covid on the democratic process but also because there are positive and wider reasons for remote and hybrid meetings.

At the meeting of Place Scrutiny Committee on 29 November 2021, Councillors expressed concern at the rising levels of Covid, including the levels of the omicron variant and highlighted the potential risks of holding physical meetings. Following the meeting, a letter signed by the four Group Leaders was sent to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities requesting him to consider the reinstatement of the provisions for remote and/or hybrid meetings as a matter of urgency.

While the law does not permit meetings of the Council, Cabinet, committees sub-committees to be held virtually at present, it is possible for informal meetings such as working parties to be held remotely or in a hybrid format and the necessary arrangements have been made to enable meetings of this nature to take place in either form.

(8) Question from Councillor D Cowan to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)

Question

Could the portfolio holder please let me know what the process is for utilities companies applying to block lanes/whole roads and what is factored into drawing up a diversionary route?

Answer

A statutory three months' notice must be given by a utility company as a traffic order will need to be made to facilitate works unless these are emergency works. Full traffic management and diversionary route plans are supplied, reviewed and agreed by officers whereby traffic is diverted via similar usage roads. A utility company may temporarily block a lane for grabbing away material for a maximum of fifteen minutes and cannot return to complete such an activity again at the same location for one hour upon completion.

(9) **Question from Councillor D Cowan to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)**

Question

When the Bell Junction reopened it was said that traffic would be monitored for a period to see how many vehicles continued to use Denton Approach and the attached residential estate as a short cut. Could the portfolio holder please let me know how this monitoring is going and if it is still ongoing?

Answer

A traffic survey of Denton Approach and the surrounding area has been undertaken. The details will be compared to the 'before' survey and a report produced recommending any appropriate action.

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