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Southend-on-Sea City Council

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THE COUNCIL - THURSDAY, 23RD MARCH, 2023 SUPPLEMENTARY PACK: AGENDA ITEMS 4, 5, 23 AND 24

Please find enclosed, for consideration at the next meeting of the The Council taking place on Thursday, 23rd March, 2023, the following papers that were unavailable when the agenda was printed.

Agenda No Item

4. **Questions from Members of the Public** (Pages 3 - 6)
Questions and answers sheet attached
5. **Questions from Members of the Council** (Pages 7 - 10)
Questions and answer sheet attached
23. **Appointments to Committees, etc** (Pages 11 - 12)
List of Changes to Committees, etc attached
24. **Opposition Business - Charging for Car Parking in our parks** (Pages 13 - 14)
Opposition Business Motion attached

Rob Harris
Principal Democratic Services Officer

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SOUTHEND ON SEA CITY COUNCIL
Council – Thursday 23rd March 2023
Questions from members of the Public

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1. Question from Mr David Webb to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

What type of equipment will be put in each playground during 2023-2024 and how much will each playground cost to be improved?

Answer

The Council has allocated a capital parks improvement programme with an approximate value of £1.3 million. The delivery of this programme is currently being tendered to interested landscape designers. At this stage there is no set value for each site but playground improvements are being focused on the following sites:- Priory Park, Bournes Green Park, Chalkwell Park, Belfairs Park, Southchurch Park, Friars Park and Oakwood Park. The process will consider the design and equipment for each of these sites. In addition, there is Levelling Up Funding of £85,000 which has been allocated to improving play facilities in Milton Gardens. We will also be looking to make improvements to some smaller playgrounds on a wider City programme.

2. Question from Mr David Webb to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

What ways will the joint administration push forward on our green city ambition and how much will it cost?

Answer

Thank you for your question. We will be delivering a programme of carbon mitigation and climate resilience projects which will include building retrofit, electric vehicle infrastructure, coastal resilience and community engagement. The Climate Change programme capital budget of £1.5 million will be used and the council will continue to access grant funding where feasible.

3. Question from Sarah Yapp to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

We have been very concerned about the management of the urban trees within the city.

With the emphasis on the poor air quality of Southend and the knowledge that our children's health is suffering with above the national average levels of asthma in the city, knowing that trees filter our air of the dangerous PM2.5s that are affecting our children's lungs and brain development. Added to this there is a new emphasis on the Urban Heat Stress and we know that due to their physiology children are unable to regulate their body temperatures. We also know that urban tree canopy of mature trees can help reduce street temperature by several degrees, it seems counter-intuitive that we have managed to remove so many thousands of trees within Southend.

Can we have an urgent halting of tree removal until air quality monitoring is completed and the urban heat stress strategy is implemented?

Answer

The Council has 20,000 street trees which are regularly inspected and maintained. It is inevitable with age and modern conditions some trees will fail and need attention which may include felling. The Council is not removing thousands of trees. Between 2019/20 and 2021/22 it has been necessary to remove 680 trees; however, 1,945 trees have been planted. This represents a net gain of 1,265 new trees over that period. Thousands more have been maintained to ensure their longevity. Trees are only removed after rigorous procedures by qualified arboricultural staff when no other management option is feasible. We are continually looking at new options for retaining trees, if at all possible. In the vast majority of cases trees are only removed when they are dead, dying, dangerous, diseased or damaged and present an identified risk to residents or are the subject of a valid insurance claim against the council for property damage. The council would be failing in its duty both legally and morally if it retained trees known to be hazardous.

The issue of felling of private trees is however a more prevalent and deep concern to the council and we offer advice to residents on how to care for and maintain their garden trees. It is also the main way of building up the canopy cover. The council being only able to plant on its own land of course.

The question of highway works affecting trees is a balance between the council's desire to retain trees and the duty of care to ensure safety of pavements for residents, especially the elderly and those with disabilities, blind and partially sighted, mobility scooter users and those with children's buggies and prams. Other means of protecting trees which are causing pavement heave and cracks etc will be sought before any decision is taken to fell which is the last resort.

As to the tree canopy our immediate target is 15% coverage but there will be some areas where this is not possible and others where it is exceeded. When a tree is removed it is recorded for replanting to take place, if possible, in the immediate vicinity but if not in another more suitable area, as can be seen we have kept to our commitment of planting 2 for 1. Far more than previous administrations.

There are a number of issues relating to replanting such as the presence of utilities and potential contamination from a diseased tree which prevent immediate replanting in the same spot.

I think it would be fair here to state reasons why we will not remove or prune trees - because we are often asked to do so.

If the tree is blocking TV and satellite reception or a view, causing shading or blocking sunlight reaching solar panels placed on a neighbouring private property.

The tree is considered to be producing too much pollen.

The tree is lightly touching telephone lines.

4. Question from Sarah Yapp to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

I would like to know what the arrangement for payments and contracts with the monopoly that the Council has with Tree Fella so that we can be clear that there is not internal corruption occurring?

Answer

The arboricultural maintenance contract was subject to open competition. The contract was awarded to Treefella following a careful evaluation of the quality and price of the bids submitted to determine which of the competing companies offered the best value for money. This contract (arboricultural works) is to be advertised for open competition again later this year.

The costs for all works are determined by a schedule of rates which sets out the different kinds of tree work carried out. Work is specified by the council's own, qualified, and experienced Arboricultural Officers based on the condition and needs of the tree specific to its form, habit, and location. All works orders are retained on the council's database and they form an important record of work to each tree. All invoices for payment are checked for accuracy by the Arboricultural team leader and authorised by a separate Officer. Payments are made electronically. All council budgets and payments are subject to periodic audit.

5. Question from Brian Ayling to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

How much money has the Council paid in compensation regarding planning applications over the past five years?

Answer

In the last 5 years the Council has not paid any money as compensation related to planning applications.

Questions from Councillors

1. Question from Councillor Dent to the Cabinet Member for Public Protection (Cllr Terry)

Question

Reckless behaviour from cyclists and users of e-scooters on the pavements and pedestrianised areas of Southend continue to cause great concern for residents.

Could the Cabinet Member please outline the measures that the Council is taking to address this, and to make pedestrianised areas of the city safer for everyone?

Answer

Prohibitions on cycling and e-scooters in pedestrianised areas were additional behaviours that were added to the renewal of the town centre Public Space Protection Order (PSPO). Community Safety Officers and Police can issue Fixed Penalty Notices of £100 as part of an enforcement process to address use of them in the prohibited area.

Community Safety Officers also have Community Safety Accreditation Scheme (CSAS) powers which enable them to address these issues across the city as part of a targeted enforcement process with Police colleagues.

2. Question from Councillor Dent to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

Could the Cabinet Member please provide an update regarding the Jazz Centre UK, its future at the Beecroft Gallery, and efforts to find an alternative venue for the centre?

Answer

Members of the Jazz Centre UK (JCUK) have recently been providing information regarding the council's decision to ask them to relocate after many years of rent-free space as well as free utilities and calls on Council assistance, well beyond what it has been able to make available to other small organisations. After numerous letters, freedom of information requests, all focused on the situation from JCUK perspective, I wanted to reiterate our position to balance the narrative.

JCUK grew out of an initial National Jazz Archive project which is still in operation in Loughton. The two organisations have some crossover but JCUK in Southend has developed a unique offer including displays and outreach work including education and participation. The Council has been supportive of the project and generously provided free accommodation in the Beecroft building for over 7 years under a service level agreement (SLA) recognising the value of the art form and potential footfall and engagement. The relationship has been difficult at times with the gallery operating under council management and the shared space seeing live music and events that are not necessarily consistent with our main offer as a gallery.

Different cultural behaviours between Council staff and jazz centre representatives have inevitably created some friction, but nevertheless we have continued despite these challenges and this has no bearing whatsoever to the council serving notice.

When space at the Beecroft was initially offered, the intention was for the museum service to move to a new seafront location. The costs of that project spiralled considerably beyond original expectations and made the plans unviable. This decision whilst inevitable, has perpetuated the inability of the Council to present Southend's heritage offer and art collection in a way which shows it to its best advantage and precludes expansion to cater for our new and exciting internationally renowned collections. It is this inability to manage our spaces in the most effective way for the benefit of the museum service and the public that has led to the current decision. We are currently blocking up large parts of the Central Museum and offsite storage and unable to tell our significant stories effectively. This can no longer go on.

The council meets with JCUK regularly and for the last two years we have raised the issue of the increasing costs and financial challenges to local authorities. JCUK as a charity stated that they did not have funds to pay rent and a formula to contribute through commission on sales items was agreed. An initial proposal by the council was rejected and the Council lowered the commission amount and a review after a year was agreed. At the end of the first year, £84 was the total commission. During the period of support, the contribution of space and support based on external valuation is £193,000

Within the SLA conditions, there is a notice period of 12 months, and we are now in this period. Whilst a rent contribution has subsequently been offered, it goes no way to covering the costs to the council of the potential need to find museum space itself elsewhere or solve our core issue which is to show more of our collection and reduce our storage requirements.

An alternative space in the Beecroft has been offered which is more suitable from a gallery and council perspective and more representative of the rent JCUK say they can now pay. The JCUK have advised that this space is not suitable for their needs.

The museum service is now preparing an exciting future for the heritage collection and Beecroft Gallery. Bringing items out from storage to be able to tell residents and visitors about our fascinating heritage including our internationally relevant collections. Our project which itself will attract interest from national funding agencies will free many items from storage and reduce costs to the service and ultimately, the taxpayer.

Whilst the Jazz Centre UK is a very worthwhile project and brings some benefits, it is not Southend specific and the City Council needs to prioritise the City's heritage all set against a backdrop of difficult financial decisions.

For JCUK to thrive it needs an operating model to support itself, wherever it may move to, merchandising and revenue generation, memberships and evening performances and refreshments. This is just not possible in the Beecroft basement. And whilst the Council continues to support the JCUK in its search for an alternative site – of which several have been suggested – the Council and museum service are here to provide a service for all its citizens.

3. Question from Councillor Keith Evans to the Cabinet Member for Economic Recovery, Regeneration and Housing (Cllr Gilbert)

Question

Can the Cabinet Member tell me when residents of South Essex Homes were consulted regarding the increase in service charge?

Answer

The service charge increases being introduced in April were considered as part of the draft budget published online on 5th January 2023, prior to this draft budget being tabled at Cabinet on 12th January. This provided the opportunity for suggestions and amendments to the proposed budget to be made before the publication of the final Housing Revenue Account budget and its consideration at Cabinet and Full Council on 14th and 23rd February respectively.

In keeping with the process followed annually there is no additional consultation with council tenants undertaken directly in regard to annual service charge uplifts, as this does not relate to any change of process or the introduction of new elements to the service charge but relates only to levying the actual costs of providing these services. As is well known, this has increased significantly due mainly to the global energy crisis. Where changes occur outside of this annual norm, such as any in-year uplifts, these are subject to additional consultation with tenants.

4. Question from Councillor Keith Evans to the Cabinet Member for Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Collins)

Question

How much profit does the golf course in Belfairs Park generate for the Council?

Answer

Belfairs golf course does not generate any profit for the council. The council is currently subsidising the service by around £40,000 net each year.

SOUTHEND ON SEA CITY COUNCIL
COUNCIL MEETING – 23rd March 2023
Changes to Membership of Committees etc.

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Licensing Committee

1. Councillor Mulroney to be appointed to the Liberal Democrat vacancy following the resignation of Councillor Thompson.
2. Councillor Borton to be appointed Chair of the Committee for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

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To Full Council

Opposition Business Motion

Charging for Car Parking in our Parks

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23rd March 2023

At the Council meeting held on 23rd February 2023, the 3-party coalition approved, by a very small majority, its budget proposals for the coming years. Contained within the budget, are plans to introduce parking charges in 2023 and 2024 to many of the City's parks and leisure facilities, where currently the car parks are free for all to use.

In reaching this very unpopular decision, the coalition has completely failed to understand the city it claims to represent. It has failed to consider the needs of our residents and visitors and the impact such a damaging policy will have on them and the Council's own leisure facilities.

Belfairs Park users will be particularly impacted by such charges, as there are two golf clubs, two bowls clubs, a restaurant, a riding school for the disabled, the woodland centre, the cricket club and other leisure and outdoor facilities and activities. This policy will severely impact the viability of many of these clubs, which are using the Council's facilities and for which they already pay the Council to use.

Many of the users of the golf course and parks facilities are retired pensioners on fixed incomes. The introduction of these punitive charges may result in many not being able to afford to continue with partaking in the leisure, social and physical activities they currently enjoy. It could further result in the closure of many of these clubs and therefore, a significant loss of other income for the Council as a result of this deeply damaging and poorly thought out policy.

This Council therefore resolves that:

1. The proposed introduction of parking charges at Belfairs Park, Chalkwell Park, Priory Park and Southchurch Park in the 2024/25 financial year are abolished.
2. The proposed introduction of parking charges at Big Gunners Park, Little Gunners Park and Jones Memorial Ground planned for the 2023/24 financial year are abolished.
3. It becomes Council Policy not to introduce car parking charges at any of the city's parks.

Proposed By: Cllr Lesley Salter
Cllr Alan Dear
Cllr Jack Warren

Seconded By: Cllr Beggs
Cllr Boyd
Cllr Buck
Cllr Buckley
Cllr Courtenay
Cllr Cox
Cllr Davidson
Cllr Evans (Fay)
Cllr Folkard
Cllr Garston
Cllr Habermel
Cllr Harland
Cllr Jarvis
Cllr Jones (Darryl)
Cllr Lamb
Cllr Moyies
Cllr Nelson
Cllr Walker