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Southend-on-Sea City Council

Executive Director (Strategy & Change):

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Dear Councillor

POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - THURSDAY, 7TH NOVEMBER, 2024

Please find attached the questions from members of the public, together with the respective responses from the relevant Cabinet Member(s), at the meeting of the Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 7th November 2024.

Kind regards,

Stephanie Cox
Principal Democratic Services Officer

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SOUTHEND ON SEA CITY COUNCIL
Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee Meeting
7th November 2024

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Question 1. from Mr Webb for Cllr Cowan (Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Corporate Strategy and Leader of the Council)

Since 2nd July, 'MySouthend' was updated to enable residents to report issues online and submit cases, however, to be able to do this successfully, you have to know the postcode of the address of the issue.

There are also only a small of list of forms displayed on the first landing page and limited options of other forms, making it more difficult for residents to correctly identify which one they should be using.

Does the Portfolio Holder agree that the portal could be made more user friendly, for example to:

1. Begin typing the address field to automatically populate the postcode and other address details (address auto generator).
2. have a more general form where a photo can be uploaded for the report – making it easier for residents for whom English is not their first language.
3. Improved site navigation and buttons with a picture stating 'other forms'.
4. for fly tipping cases, a picture option to report evidence of fly tipping.

Response:

The new MySouthend platform is aligned to the design of the website which ensures that MySouthend meets UK public sector accessibility requirements.

Suggestions for improvement are welcome. In response to the examples given in your question:

- **Address searches – Where a postcode cannot be used, an option has been added to enter an address manually. Other options have been added to choose a location by dropping a pin on a map and to use a “my location” tool. The option of using the first line of an address is being explored but there are technical issues associated with this.**
- **General Form with Photo - The current general contact forms are being removed from the system as they require significant manual intervention from customer services. Photos can be uploaded for specific service requests.**
- **Improved site navigation - A list of all 150 forms is available on both the website’s MySouthend page and the My Account page. A regularly updated list of the 10 most popular forms is also provided for MySouthend account users. Using picture options to help navigation does not meet accessibility requirements as they are not compatible with screen reader technology. It is recommended that the “Search this website” tool is used to search for forms as this has now been optimised for MySouthend.**
- **Picture option for fly-tipping - The ability to load fly-tipping and highway defect pictures as evidence has already been enabled. An additional photo upload option is also available for registered users via the case timeline.**

Question 2. from Ms Cowdrey for Cllr Cowan (Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Corporate Strategy and Leader of the Council)

The Constitution makes no mention of webcasting but the Webcast Library states; ‘Webcasting enables any member of the public to view these meetings. Webcasting aims to deliver greater openness, to a much wider audience, at a time and place convenient to them.’

It cites Full Council meetings, meetings of Cabinet, Scrutiny Committees and some Committees. Historically, the Health and Well-being Board (HWB) has been webcast live and remained available for playback at residents and partners convenience.

I would like to know why the HWB on 22nd October was moved to the Forum where webcasting facilities are not available, effectively reducing openness and transparency for those residents who would wish to access the meeting remotely or on their own time, and whether this exclusion will continue going forward? if so, how will the council ensure inclusion, access, openness and transparency for residents in relation to the important content under discussion?

Response:

There is no legal requirement to webcast or record meetings of the Health and Wellbeing Board.

The decision to hold the recent Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB) meeting at The Forum was made to provide a more accessible and neutral venue for all partners involved. This was in response to discussion between HWB partners who made this request.

It's important to note that the Health and Wellbeing Board is not a scrutiny committee but a partnership to drive forward health policy, and public attendance remains welcome. While we cannot webcast meetings held in other venues, we will consider ways to record them for broader public access in the future.

No permanent venue change has been made, and we are reviewing options for future locations.

Question 3. from Ms Mitchell for Cllr Cowan (Leader of the Council)

The continuous commentary about the potential budget gap in Southend, identifies children's and adult social care services as the substantial cause.

I am dismayed as are many residents to hear of cuts yet again being mentioned as a solution by portfolio holders.

Following the Autumn Budget statement, could the Labour led administration please tell us if they are seeking significant additional funding from government, not to simply maintain diminished services, but to deliver much more support as needed by our residents, to prevent further crises.

Response:

Thank you for your question.

Pressures in statutory services remain high and the average cost of a children's social care placement is now £352,000 and an Adult Social Care residential placement is 76% higher than it was two years ago. We have a responsibility to meet these costs as well as deliver a balanced budget for future years. This will require difficult choices to be made but to directly challenge an incorrect assertion in the question, this administration has not advocated cuts to essential services as a solution to close our budget gap.

To the contrary, this administration has repeatedly stated that we will not contemplate cuts to essential services such as family centres and libraries. We are yet to see what the budgets announcements specifically mean for Southend but what the Chancellor has set out regarding the affordable homes programme, pothole funding, SEND uplift, UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), additional money for homelessness prevention and pressures, local planning capacity, increase in Adult Social Care funding, and Revenue Support Grant, is positive for the local government sector in general.