

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

Council Meeting – 14th December 2017

Question 1 from Councillor Wexham to the Executive Councillor for Housing, Planning & Sustainability

The London Boroughs have started putting in sprinkler systems into the High rise and buildings that have a lot of people using Council services like Schools, Theatres and the like.

What is Southend Council going to do in our Town?

Answer

Members will be aware that the Council commissioned a tri partite fire safety review in conjunction with South Essex Homes and Essex Fire & Rescue Service in the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. This work is underway and is reviewing fire safety practices, procedures and policies in relation to the Council's property portfolio including its housing stock, schools and theatres in order to make recommendations for any necessary updates in light of the emerging lessons from the tragedy and following the Public Inquiry and independent review of Building Regulations.

The initial findings will be reported to members in the March Cabinet cycle. The Council and South Essex Homes will continue to monitor the situation for both its residential and non-residential buildings very carefully, including enforcement of building regulations where required, and will bring forward proposals for any change of approach in relation to sprinklers or any other fire safety related matters in the light of future legislative and/or regulatory policy changes or as a result of the tri partite review.

In addition to actions taken that were set out in the report to Cabinet in September the Council has researched and written to the owners of all private residential blocks (over 18m tall) to encourage them to reassure themselves about the safety of their external cladding and associated fire safety measures.

Question 2 from Councillor Terry to the Leader of the Council

With Reference to the media comments the Leader made supporting his 7 landlord Councillors, does the Leader of the Council fully understand

the purpose, the meaning and his responsibility, as Leader of the Council, regarding NOLAN STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE?

Answer

S.33 of the Localism Act 2011 allows the Council's Standards Committee to grant a dispensation to a Member who has a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest, in prescribed circumstances.

It is a quite lawful process and is not in conflict with the Nolan Standards.

The Standards Committee followed due process and after carefully considering all relevant factors decided to grant dispensations to the 8 Councillors who had applied - including one from your own group.

Question 3 from Councillor Terry to the Executive Councillor for Transport, Waste and Regulatory Services

Does the Portfolio Holder recall that one of the biggest and most controversial arguments at Southend Borough Council, within the last few years, was the Council then researched, justified and identified need to widen the bottle-neck road Priory Crescent because of severe congestion, causing disruption and delay to residents and businesses based in the east of the Borough, which is still occurring to this day?

Answer

The Council has a detailed and long standing computer model, which has been used to model different scenarios for a range of planning applications. This model has been used to undertake initial assessments of the Queensway scheme, including how network reassignment will occur. Network reassignment occurs when drivers alter their route choices as a result of a change to the highway alignment. This reassignment occurs at every highway scheme, regardless of size and can result in increasing or decreasing traffic flows along a given route. The model for Queensway and Town Centre areas show a network reassignment reduction of 75 vehicle movements in the morning peak hour for Priory Crescent.

Question 4 from Councillor Ayling to the Executive Councillor for Transport, Waste and Regulatory Services

Would the Portfolio holder please explain how Priory Crescent can take any more traffic, as he suggested in a recent media report, when it has been identified for many years as being in need of an alternative route and how can the Queensway highway proposals be implemented without serious consideration of all feeder and cross town traffic?

Answer

I would refer you to the answer I gave under question 3.

Question 5 from Councillor Ward to the Executive Councillor for Transport, Waste and Regulatory Services

Further to the recent media comments made by yourself regarding changes to the highways infrastructure within the Better Queensway, “traffic will be displaced from Victoria Avenue into Priory Crescent”, what impact do you think this will have on my constituents in Shoeburyness Ward who use the already overloaded and congested Priory Crescent as their main route in and out of Southend?

Answer

I would refer you to the answer I gave under question 3.

Question 6 from Councillor Ayles to the Executive Councillor for Culture, Tourism and the Economy

An allocation of I believe £22,000 has been set aside to support the village green festival in Chalkwell Park. However, the village green event this year has been cancelled, therefore the £22,000 will not be used. Can this money then be used to support Leigh folk Festival that brings international acts, tourists and publicity to Southend . £22,000 will assure the folk festival support for approx. 5 years.

Answer

This year's Village Green did take place and was very successful including some outstanding community participation. It is of course next year's event, 2018, that is not due to take place.

We looked through the budget for the current year and cannot identify where your information regarding £22,000 comes from, as there is nothing specific relating to Village Green at all so the answer is no. I would be happy to look into this further though.

The Council has been very supportive of the excellent Leigh Folk Festival over the years and will continue to support it where possible.

Question 7 from Councillor Ayles to the Executive Councillor for Corporate & Community Support Services

The committee rooms have had water coolers installed, what is the average installation cost and the average total running costs per year?

Answer

We have not installed water coolers to individual committee rooms. We have a portable water cooler that is used in committee rooms for certain meetings. This has an annual operating cost of £120.00 with water bottles supplied at a cost of £3.50 each.'

Question 8 from Councillor Callaghan to the Executive Councillor for Housing, Planning & Sustainability

Why does Genesis Housing feel that there is no need for a sprinkler system in Richmond House but the private sector have this privilege?

Answer

Members will recall the Deputy Chief Executive (Place)'s report to Cabinet on 19th September 2017 which gave an update on the current position and proposed action in relation to the Council's own residential housing blocks, following the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower on 14th June. The report confirmed there are 13 tower blocks owned by the Council in the town and each of the blocks has a sprinkler system installed in the ground floor refuse chamber, as these are areas where low level fires have occurred in the past, and these sprinkler systems have proved to be very effective.

There are no sprinkler systems installed within individual properties, on communal landings or on the staircase at each block and there are no current plans to install such systems. This is because the Essex Fire and Rescue Service have never recommended the installation of

sprinklers whenever the regular Fire Risk Assessments have been carried out to the blocks. There is a 'Stay Put' policy in place which means that, other than where a fire occurs within an individual property - when the occupants are recommended to evacuate, having reported the fire to the Fire Service - other residents are advised to stay within their homes, unless and until, directed otherwise by the Fire Service.

The design of the buildings overall, and the compartmentation of individual dwellings, has always lead to the Fire and Rescue Service confirming the 'Stay Put' policy for our blocks and on the rare occasions when fires have occurred within the blocks, they have always been contained within the compartmentalised area.

Nationally, public sector landlords anticipate the Government's 'Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety', chaired by Dame Judith Hackitt, is likely to lead to a range of changes to Building Regulations and Fire Regulations and this may include revised guidance in relation to the retrofitting of sprinkler systems. However, ta this stage, we do not have any understanding of the detail of such changes.

Therefore the Council and, in relation to our residential tower blocks, South Essex Homes will continue to monitor the situation very carefully and will bring forward proposals for any change of approach in relation to sprinklers or any other fire safety related matters in the light of future legislative and/or regulatory policy changes."

Question 9 from Councillor Callaghan to the Executive Councillor for Housing, Planning & Sustainability

How many properties were purchased or reserved in Richmond House for/by local residents of Southend please or what percentage?

Answer

At present, Genesis Housing has 41 reservations for the 52 properties at Richmond House and have issued memorandum of sales on 30% of these. Of the 41 reservations, 22 (54%) of the applicants live or work in Southend, whilst 80% live in Essex.

Following the successful local shared ownership event held at the Civic Centre on 30th November, a further 4 people who work or live in the borough have already made appointments to view the remaining 11 unsold properties on 6th January 2018. A further viewing day is scheduled for 13th January 2018.

In regards to Shared Ownership, Registered Providers such as Genesis were previously able to prioritise those applicants that live or work in the borough however the Government has now relaxed the eligibility criteria for this product meaning that the Council cannot prescribe who can purchase these shared ownership units. The Council does however work closely with Registered Providers such to make sure that local marketing is undertaken and that a marketing event is put on for local residents & workers.

When the shared ownership units are sold, the Council undertakes data analysis to see how many purchasers have a local connection whether by living or working in the borough. Over the last 3 shared ownership schemes we had a local take up of 75% (across 59 units in 16/17).

Context

Richmond House is a fully Shared Ownership development of 52 units developed by Randal Watts and owned by Genesis Housing. Shared Ownership is a part buy, part rent purchasing scheme aimed at helping first time buyers get a foot onto the property ladder. Through Shared Ownership, purchasers buy an initial share in their property and pay rent on the remaining percentage allowing purchasers to own equity in their own property.

As of 4th January 2016, the Government made changes to relax the Shared Ownership eligibility and these changes are detailed below:

- The threshold on maximum household income per application was raised from £60,000 to £80,000 (outside of London).
- Removal of the restriction on the number of bedrooms within the property an applicant could purchase. Previously Shared Ownership purchasers were eligible to apply for properties with up to one extra bedroom than the household size required. The change stated that as long as the applicant could afford it, they could apply for properties with as many bedrooms as they wish.
- The only priority groups included was changed to serving members of the British Armed Forces and those honourably discharged in the last two years (or those who are the surviving partners of regular service personnel who have died in service and have applied within two years of the bereavement). This removes the priority for local connection.

Priority

Although the Council is not allowed to give priority to local residents for the shared ownership product by the Government and this is the same for all local authorities so for example local Southend residents can purchase shared ownership properties in Castle Point or Rochford or London if they choose to. Also local residents had as much chance as anyone else in purchase these units and given the prominence of the building and the amount of press articles regarding the sit, local people would've had more notice of the availability of these units.

Website

In terms of the Genesis website query which was raised in the Echo last week – prospective shared owners should use the Help to Buy East South East website managed by Bedford Pilgrims Housing Association (bpha) (<https://www.helptobuyese.org.uk/property-search/property-search-results>) not the Genesis website. Any enquiries should be directed to this website.

Given the more commercial nature of this product the properties have also been marketed via the Rightmove website by Genesis & Redloft.

Question 10 from Councillor Nevin to the Executive Councillor for Transport, Waste and Regulatory Services

Please can the portfolio holder tell me when the disabled toilets in Hamlet Court Road are expected to reopen? The closure is having an adverse impact on trading in Hamlet Court Road, which is our second biggest High Street. Residents would like to see improvements.

Answer

The door and frame has been damaged beyond repair by an excessive vandalism attack. We anticipate the work will be completed by end of January 2018.