

## QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

Council Meeting – 24<sup>th</sup> October 2019

### Question 1 from Councillor Ayles to the Cabinet Member for Business, Culture and Tourism

#### Question

Would the cabinet holder for tourism Cllr K Robinson conduct an internal enquiry into the pier improvements projects to investigate the actions taken by the previous Cabinet holders?

To focus on:

- The reason the Cabinet holder Mrs Holland 2017/ 2018 was allowed to ignore Councillors who had agreed on a feasibility design for the pavilion at the land end of the pier.
- Instructing the approved architects to produce further concepts. Thus adding to the cost and delaying progress and then stopping all works on the pavilion.
- The reason the Cabinet holder Mr Courtney 2018/2019 who was well aware of the project, did not correct the action of Mrs Holland.
- The reason the Cabinet holder Mr Courtney 2018/2019 did not notify any other Councillors about the pier train replacement project.
- The reason the Cabinet holder Mr Courtney 2018/2019 did not consult with any other Councillors about the replacement pier train design prior to going out to tender.

#### Answer

I am not intending to undertake an inquiry.

Members were involved in several workshops to consider designs for the aspiration to build a new facility on the pavilion deck of the pier. A general concept had been agreed, however both its construction and running costs needed to be fully calculated along with demonstrating a viable business plan.

During the last year 2050 priorities have been focusing various investment decisions and whilst the Pier is a major part of them there are competing pressures. The current year's budget continues the necessary work on the Pier's structure and we have also now appointed a contractor for introducing the new trains in 2021.

Further investment in the Pier is a priority for this administration to support our tourism sector, but we need to consider the phasing of developments to ensure that we proceed within an agreed financial envelope and capturing the aspirations of residents' 2050 expectations. I anticipate options for the pavilion deck to be presented to members in the culture business and tourism working party and will also include public consultation.

### **Question 2 from Councillor Aylen to the Leader of the Council**

#### **Question**

Why is the mayor not being permitted to promote Southend by his charity committee?

#### **Answer**

The Mayor is not being stopped from promoting Southend by his Charity Committee. In fact they are proactively helping him to promote Southend through the many events they are holding throughout the Borough.

### **Question 3 from Councillor McDonald to the Cabinet Member Transport, Capital and Inward Investment**

#### **Question**

Problems caused by the cap on the number of visitors' permits residents are allowed to buy within residents' permit schemes have been raised with central ward councillors, and especially those representing residents in the QE scheme, for several months. When he undertakes the parking strategy review, will the cabinet member commit to investigating all the ways that the cap can be lifted for those residents who have health needs, caring needs and other circumstances not currently covered by other exemptions so they can get more visitors' permits?

#### **Answer**

I can confirm that the restrictions on Visitors' Permits are in place to ensure parking spaces are not abused and are used for their correct purpose.

The Council is currently reviewing its Parking Strategy and as part of that Review will be looking at the issue of permits generally. It is anticipated the work on permits will be completed by the end of November 2019.

## **Question 4 from Councillor Dent to the Leader of the Council**

### **Question**

Can the portfolio holder for housing and communities tell me what, if any, regulatory powers the Council has over property management companies active in the borough?

### **Answer**

There is currently no overarching statutory regulation of private sector letting or managing agents in England however Government has said that regulation will be introduced in the future. In regards to this, in July this year, the Regulation of Property Agents working group, chaired by Lord Best, submitted their final report to the Government for consideration and we are awaiting their feedback to this report and the associated recommendations.

## **Question 5 from Councillor Davidson to the Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning**

### **Question**

OFGEM, the energy regulator, recently issued an enforcement notice to Robin Hood Energy because the company has so far failed to make its 2018/19 Renewable Obligation payments. The amount owing is £9.4 million.

In view of this, is the Council still intending to proceed with its plans to transfer the contract for the operation of Southend Energy from Ovo Energy Ltd. to Robin Hood Energy?"

### **Answer**

Robin Hood Energy applied to Ofgem in August to pay the sums due in instalments as had been agreed with other suppliers in 2018 for several business reasons. On Tuesday, Robin Hood Energy confirmed that they would be paying the sums due in full during w/c 28 October using a loan facility agreed with Nottingham City Council instead of instalment terms with Ofgem.

The accounts for Robin Hood show a business that is running an operating profit in difficult energy market where many other suppliers have failed. They expect to declare a surplus again for this financial year which can be reinvested in vulnerable customers as Robin Hood Energy is a non-profit organisation. Robin Hood Energy has the cash resources to pay this payment immediately if required but for risk management and other reasons would prefer to make instalments to be complete by March 2020.

We have received a letter from the Chief Executive of Robin Hood Energy in which she confirms that they could have paid the sums due in full but for business reasons would have preferred to pay in instalments. A second letter confirms that the sums due will be paid in w/c 28 October and a third letter from Nottingham City Council confirms the loan facility.

In the light of this information, The Council is continuing to work to finalise the contract to get the transfer implemented as soon as possible.

### **Question 6 from Councillor Dent to Leader of the Council**

#### **Question**

Can the cabinet member for Housing tell me what impact he anticipates that the Conservative government's decision to increase the rate of lending of the Public Works Loan Board by 1% will have on the Council's housebuilding plans?

#### **Answer**

Current housebuilding plans will not be affected as the relevant funding through borrowing, reserves and retained Right to Buy receipts is already in place. However, any future plans will need to be assessed with the appropriate financial due diligence to ensure their viability.

This change does potentially add to the financing costs of future developments and in that respect is unhelpful to our aspirations to build genuinely affordable housing. However, interest rates remain at historically low levels, and it will still be possible for the Council to prudently invest in new schemes.

## **Question 7 from Councillor Cowan to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Capital and Inward Investment**

### **Question**

Can the portfolio holder update me on the status of my requests for pedestrian crossings on Western Approaches and Whitehouse Road?

### **Answer**

In August a list of schemes per ward were sent to every Ward Councillor. Whitehouse Road and Western Approaches were both on this list and I offered to meet with anyone that had any queries.

Therefore, in response to the question both of the pedestrian crossings are being reviewed and the Highways Department will bring back their findings and the Traffic Regulations Working Party and it is anticipated this will be in March 2020.

## **Question 8 from Councillor Cowan to the Leader of the Council**

### **Question**

Could the leader tell me if the Council has any powers to help women in Southend who find themselves in financial difficulty due to the state pension equalisation?

### **Answer**

I greatly sympathise with women who have been put in this position. Unfortunately the Council does not have any powers or provision to support women who may be affected by any changes to the state pension. State pension equalisation is a national agenda and is a matter for the national Government to address.

## **Question 9 from Councillor George to the Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care**

### **Question**

What steps are currently being taken by the Council to improve the availability of and access to mental health services?

## **Answer**

The Council works in partnership with Southend CCG and has an integrated mental health commissioning team which works to develop local mental health services. This includes improving the availability of these local services and access to them for our residents. There has been substantial additional investment into local mental health services over the last three years. This has included the development of a specialist community perinatal mental health service, a 24/7 mental health liaison service in Southend Hospital, a joint police / NHS team to provide dedicated support for a small number of very high intensity service users, a south east Essex mental health recovery college, and additional staff in the local primary care psychological therapy service.

A new mental health wellbeing hub will open in November. This will be followed by a mental health crisis sanctuary in December, and from April next year there will be a major development to provide 24/7 specialist mental health crisis support and new mental health home treatment services to provide an alternative to hospital admission. There will also be additional staff and support to provide an improved treatment pathway for people with personality disorders.

There is an expectation that there will continue to be additional investment by the CCG to develop and enhance local mental health services over the next five years.

## **Question 10 from Councillor George to the Leader of the Council**

### **Question**

Would the Leader agree that a factor in the poor quality of mental health in parts of Milton Ward is a direct result of the equality of housing in parts of the Milton Ward?

### **Answer**

A large number of factors are likely to contribute to poor mental health in an individual or in a local population. Anything that adds to the stress an Individual experiences, particularly in the long term, may have an adverse impact on their mental health. That will include living in poor quality housing.

## **Question 11 from Councillor Bright to the Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning**

### **Question**

The Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning should be aware of the recent issues that have arisen with regards to the garden waste collection service. Many residents have experienced difficulties in renewing their collection service after they received an incorrect renewals letter from Veolia. Others have also had experiences where their direct debit forms have not been properly processed.

Could the Portfolio Holder please confirm how many residents currently pay for a garden waste collection service; how many residents have been affected by the problems I have mentioned; how many residents that have had a permit for the current period have not yet renewed their permit for the forthcoming period; and what the Council is doing to ensure that residents are able to renew their garden waste collection service permits as easily as possible?

### **Answer**

There are currently approximately 1,400 Garden Waste Customers.

9,194 Residents were affected by the direct debit issue and written to with an apology and instructions how to bring their accounts up to date – as of 17<sup>th</sup> October 2019 , 53% of these have paid

There are approximately 4,000 customers that need to renew for the forthcoming period.

The Council has been closely liaising with Veolia to ensure this issue is not repeated, the following actions have been put in place;

- New software implemented by Veolia to ensure timely reminders are sent to customers who are due to renew the service
- Fully automated garden waste on line portal where customers can renew and access the garden waste services

<https://www.veoliasouthend.com/>

It must be noted that at no time have customers had the service stopped over the last year while the disruption in the payments system occurred.

## **Question 12 from Councillor Kelly to the Cabinet Member for Business, Tourism and Culture**

### **Question**

Can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the situation of the Kursaal, in particular the status of the lease and what possibilities have been investigated to re-open it to the public?

### **Answer**

The Council owns the freehold however the Kursaal is let on a 250 year lease which was assigned to the current tenant for over £6m in September 2018. Since this time, the tenant of the bowling has vacated. The head tenant is considering potential future uses for the asset which will build the rental income and get the spaces open to the public again. The listed building has historically been very hard to let and large parts of it remain vacant.

Officers are in liaison with the head tenant's representative. As the freeholder the council is closely watching the situation of this iconic building and is mindful of the range of suggestions which are in the public domain.