

QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

Council Meeting – 10th September

Question 1 from Councillor Ayles to the Executive Councillor for Business, Culture and Tourism

Question

Southend Council according to the press gave £600,000 to a private company to allow this company to open Garons Leisure Centre.

Please explain why it was thought acceptable to give a private company £600,000 when it has been made clear that there is not a single extra penny to maintain the open spaces and parks or fix urgent required items within our parks?

Answer

Fusion Lifestyle are contracted to run our leisure services and are 5 years into a 10 year contract. Leisure facilities remaining closed makes a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of our citizens and once the government guidelines on their operation changed, we began discussions about how they could be reopened. Due to the restricted capacity and state of the market we took the decision to provide funding to allow our main leisure centre at Garons to reopen.

Our parks and open spaces, part of Cllr Mulroney's portfolio, have remained open throughout the recent lockdown, providing valuable outdoor space. Although some facilities within the parks had to close to comply with Government guidance, when guidance changed, steps were taken to reopen facilities in a COVID-19 secure way. Children's play areas, outdoor fitness areas, tennis and other outdoor sports have all been reopened for use.

The parks and open spaces continue to be maintained in line with Government guidance on operating in a COVID-19 secure way which has resulted in changes to maintenance operations. However, the towns parks and open spaces remain hugely beneficial to the health and wellbeing of citizens.

There remains an ongoing budget to support the maintenance of the parks and open spaces, however, such spending is prioritised.

Question 2 from Councillor Aylen to the Executive Councillor for Community Safety and Customer Contact

Would the Cabinet Member explain as to why the Council are anti cruisers as they call them on the seafront by having extra officers and police, when no similar action is taken when thousands of cars with visitors turn up on sunny days on the seafront?

Answer

Southend has historically attracted large gatherings of organised groups of vehicles, either through car clubs or groups organised via social media. These groups are referred to nationally and locally as 'car cruises'.

These organised groups often include powerful and modified vehicles, and while the majority of those attending behave appropriately, unfortunately over a period of many years, there have been regular examples of anti-social behaviour and dangerous driving associated with such groups. This includes causing damage to the public highway; posing a danger to other highway users including pedestrians due to dangerous driving; noise and other nuisance; illegal parking, and examples of illegal itinerant trading associated with groups.

For many years, the Council and its partners including the Police, have attended car cruises, where intelligence has been obtained in advance, to ensure as far as possible that the cruises are safe and to work with the organisers where possible. The Council and its partners have supported car cruises at times with road safety displays and having officers available to provide advice, this includes attendance by the Fire Service.

The Council currently has an Injunction in place to April 2023, that prohibits certain behaviours associated with car cruises. This is to ensure that any cruise in Southend is attended in a safe manner and respectful of other visitors and residents of Southend. Since the Injunction has been in place, we have seen reduced levels of anti-social behaviour and nuisance associated with car cruises, and we continue to have Council and partner officers attend these car cruises to engage with the organisers and attendees.

As large organised groups, these car cruises are very different in nature to the regular visitors who attend, mainly independently, in large numbers to visit our town. Consequently, a proportionate level of formal measures and interventions have been implemented as described in respect of cruises.

The Council is not anti car cruise, we welcome any visitors to Southend who are respectful of other visitors, residents and our town.

Question 3 from Councillor Dent to the Executive Councillor for Environment and Planning

Question

Does the cabinet member for Environment & Planning agree with me that the climate emergency declaration which Southend Council made last year means that we should be actively embracing any opportunity to divest public investment from fossil fuels?

Answer

I am pleased to say that the Council does not have any direct investment in fossil fuels.

We do not of course regulate the Essex Pension Fund, but I am sure as the Council's representative on the Board, Cllr Dent is clear about the views that he has expressed and that Councillor Mulroney too expressed several years ago when this question was raised.

We note, however, that the Essex Pension Fund has a fiduciary duty to ensure it has sufficient funds available to pay pensions on behalf of more than 150,000 people and that investment decisions must, therefore, be directed towards achieving what is best for the financial position of the Fund. In order to maximise investment returns the Fund has a diverse range of investments, including investment attributed to the energy /mining sector.

I have no knowledge of the type of contractual arrangements that exist for the investments but what we can do, using our position on the Board, is to lobby for changes to the investments, in the interests of the pension fund members, that at the times when the Fund is considering changing investments or reinvesting it gives the highest priority to green investment opportunities which I feel sure are going to be a lucrative investment for the fund moving into the future.

Question 4 from Councillor Dent to the Executive Councillor for Business, Culture and Tourism

Question

Does the cabinet member for Business, Culture & Tourism agree with me that the performance of Fusion Lifestyle as managers of the Council's own leisure facilities has, through the COVID-19 crisis, failed to meet the standards which we as a Council would expect, particularly in terms of their communications to customers, staff and councillors and their efforts to reopen facilities as restrictions have eased?

Answer

Fusion Lifestyle placed many of their team on furlough which undoubtedly caused a significant rise in communications issues affecting everyone connected to their operation. We have been in regular dialogue with them and services are now back operating successfully albeit on a limited capacity. I expect the performance and certainly the communication from Fusion to improve now that we have committed a financial contribution and am in close liaison with our officers who manage the contract.

Question 5 from Councillor Keith Evans to the Leader of the Council

Question

Are plans being made to return to the Council Chamber imminently, with an MS Teams meeting option for those who are self-isolating, for scrutiny and full Council meetings?

Answer

The provisions to hold virtual meetings under the Coronavirus Act 2020 and associated regulations remain in force until May 2021. Remote meetings have proved an effective way of conducting business until such time as normal meetings can be resumed.

The significant change in Government guidance issued on 9 September 2020 will require that for now, Scrutiny and Full Council meetings will continue virtually.

However, I can confirm that plans are being prepared for holding physical meetings when it is safe to do with appropriate social distancing. These plans also cover hybrid meetings.

Question 6 from Councillor Keith Evans to the Leader of the Council

Question

With universal credit and other benefit payments being paid in arrears what can be done to ensure there is sufficient protection for tenants, including those who have been subject to historic court orders, not to be saddled with more debt or have to rely on charities?

Answer

In general, income is paid in arrears whether that is income from a state benefit or income from employment.

If a resident receives Housing Benefit or Universal Credit with Housing Costs and they have built up rent arrears they can apply for a Discretionary Housing Payment.

This fund can be used for rent arrears and top ups for short term needs only.

Anyone in receipt Housing Benefit or Universal Credit to support with rent costs can request this benefit to be paid direct to the landlord if they are struggling to manage their budget or have any other vulnerability issues.