

## **Council – 15<sup>th</sup> July 2021**

### **Councillor Questions**

#### **Question 1 from Cllr Nelson to the Leader of the Council**

##### **Question**

The Council recently purchased the Victorias shopping centre. Can the portfolio holder provide an update of the shopping centres financial situation and what the effect of COVID has been on these?

##### **Answer**

The Council acquired the shopping centre during the pandemic so only has pre-pandemic trading figures from the previous landlord to compare. Several essential retailers have remained open throughout, while others have been forced to close under Government guidance. All businesses have been signposted to the relevant grant schemes.

The annual contracted rent is now 2% higher than it was when the Council completed the purchase in December 2020 following the agreement of a number of new tenancies.

The rent and service charge collection rates vary each month. These are lower during the pandemic than pre-pandemic figures although this situation is improving as restrictions are lifted.

#### **Question 2 from Cllr Nelson to the Leader of the Council**

##### **Question**

How many units in the Victorias shopping centre are occupied by businesses, how many of these remained open throughout the COVID pandemic due to being essential retail?

##### **Answer**

Currently, 51 units are occupied of a total of 82 units, therefore occupancy is at 62%. 7 businesses traded through the pandemic as essential retailers, a further 5 offered click and collect only.

### **Question 3 from Cllr Garston to the Leader of the Council**

#### **Question**

Whilst there has been Administration and Public support for the retention and re-opening of the Kursaal, it looks so empty and a lost opportunity as we head into the summer season. Can I ask, what progress and what initiatives the Administration are undertaking to return this wonderful and popular asset to Southend?

#### **Answer**

Subject to further work, the potential for the Kursaal to feature in the second round Levelling Up Fund bid was articulated in the Levelling Up Fund report agreed by Cabinet on 15 June 2021.

The Council is in contact with Concrete Culture in relation to the engagement and feasibility work that they have been undertaking.

Officers maintain regular dialogue with the leaseholder and their agents. This continues to help security concerns to be addressed quickly, particularly in relation to the car park.

Issues of repair have been raised by the Council, particularly in relation to the heritage elements of the building and a survey is being commissioned so that the extent and cost of condition of these items is understood.

### **Question 4 from Cllr Garston to the Executive Councillor for Environment, Culture, Tourism and Planning**

#### **Question**

The new pier trains, which was an initiative of the last Administration, are soon to be installed on our pier. What is the Administration doing to enhance the offer at the end of the pier?

## **Answer**

Thank you, Cllr Garston for this question. The pier trains are due to arrive later this month which will bring a welcome boost to the Pier's offer and, as you know, have been unanimously supported by all groups of the Council.

This year also sees the development of the Pier Head offer, with refurbishment works at the Pavilion shortly to open and a new performance and catering space to be constructed opposite the Pier Head train station. A new toilet block, with viewing platform situated on top of the building, will also be completed this year. These new venues, along with a programme of entertainment, provide more reasons for visitors to enjoy their experience and enable them to spend longer at the Pier Head.

As the Council's representative on the Pier Museum Trust, I can also say that extensive work is being done within the museum by way of revitalising displays, information, archiving and the whole look of the area. Although not at the Pier Head, we will eventually be welcoming one of the current pier train elements into the museum, which will then show the continuity through the last 100 years or so of getting people to the Pier Head. The Pier Museum is run by volunteers and relies on membership so I would invite all councillors to join the membership and so support the recording for posterity of the icon of Southend.

## **Question 5 from Councillor Cox to the Executive Councillor for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment**

### **Question**

Can I ask the Portfolio Holder if utility companies have a legal obligation to re-instate highways and footpaths back to its original condition using the same existing materials?

### **Answer**

In line with the SROH (Specification for Reinstatement of Highways), the permanent re-instatement should be "like for like". Therefore, as the Highways Authority, this is what is expected from the utility companies;

however, there are occasions where this is sometimes not possible due to resourcing of materials and we work with utilities to reinstate in line with our policies. If the reinstatement does not accord with our policies, then the Council will engage with the utility company and request a suitable reinstatement be undertaken by the utility company. If this is not adhered to then we will undertake the works and look to recover these costs from the utility company.

However; previously the authority has permitted utilities to reinstate black bituminous macadam in red macadam footways in line with policy whereby when this road/location is due to be resurfaced it will be fully converted to a black flexible material. Red macadam is difficult to resource and expensive and therefore its use can prolong works duration affecting the highway network for an elongated period.

### **Question 6 from Councillor Cowdrey to the Executive Councillor for Public Protection**

#### **Question**

On 11<sup>th</sup> April 2018, Southend Council were granted a five year injunction focused on car cruisers in the Borough. Some of the behaviours described within the injunction are also addressed in areas subject to a current PSPO, although driving related activity are not addressed.

Can the Portfolio holder for Public Protection please update us as to the impact of the injunction, how many have actually been served and whether there have been any prosecutions to date?

#### **Answer**

The impact of the injunction has been significant. Both police and Council media teams frequently publicise the injunction across various social media channels (including the actual car cruise facebook pages) and our own websites when we receive intelligence of a planned cruise. The cruise is then policed by the Council's community safety officers and police teams, with many drivers engaged with on site and given details about the conditions of the injunction.

This process and approach have significantly reduced behaviours we once saw (pre-2018) associated with car cruises – and to date, a full prosecution relating to a breach of injunction has not been required. However, police on many occasions have prosecuted drivers in relation

to other matters whilst attending a cruise (such as vehicle defects, no MOT, no insurance, no tax etc).

What we have seen in recent months and due to COVID easing, is unplanned or sudden cruises being organised and mass attendance that follows. This has caused police and community safety team concerns due to the lack of intelligence that they are happening, and equally, the sheer volume of numbers attending and overwhelming the resources we have to police the event.

As a result of this, police and community safety team have put in place new measures to try and deal better with the numbers attending, this includes highway closure (if required), additional police resource support, CCTV footage of behaviours, civil enforcement officer patrols, and recording of driver details in order to serve the injunction notice on them (which is the first step of the breach process). If having been served the notice, the driver then breaches again, they are then liable for prosecution. We have records of all those drivers who in recent months, have been served a notice by either police or community safety officers.

So far, this seems to have made an improvement on behaviours and has impacted on numbers attending that we saw back in May/June. However, due to lockdown easing, the sense of getting out and being on the seafront is appealing to many, so we anticipate that high numbers will continue to attend both planned and unplanned cruises or meet ups across the summer months.

### **Question 7 from Councillor Keith Evans to the Leader of the Council**

#### **Question**

Does the Council have sufficient resources and staff to carry out its functions, including holding to account any outsourced services, in an acceptable timely manner?

#### **Answer**

Across all areas of the Council, managers are responsible for maintaining and managing services within the agreed budget and in line with their Business Continuity Plans and service performance measures.

The Corporate Management Team (CMT) regularly discusses resources with respect to demand and capacity. This strategic overview supports an organisation-wide response where needed. These discussions also happen at Departmental and service level where resources will be directed to the key priorities of the service and the Council at any point in time.

For example, the Council has operated a very successful staff redeployment policy in 2020/21, which has rapidly repositioned staff to critical areas of need. This has been in place to support demand during the waves of the Covid-19 pandemic.

External contracts are developed and monitored to ensure that outsourced service delivery is in line with Council policies and contracts can be challenged by the Council where the services being offered fall short of acceptable agreed standards.

### **Question 8 from Councillor Keith Evans to the Executive Councillor for Environment, Culture, Tourism and Planning**

#### **Question**

During the pandemic, a significant amount of money was given to support Fusion. Is the expectation that this money will be repaid?

#### **Answer**

Fusion, like many in the leisure sector, were hit with lengthy closure and limited opportunities to reopen. Funding agreed by the Council and supported by Government allocations provided them with the ability to maintain essential staff and services to ensure the facilities were able to reopen. Payments made were in the form of grant and not for repayment.