

## **COUNCIL – 9<sup>th</sup> September 2021**

### **Questions from Councillors**

#### **Question 1 from Councillor Keith Evans to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Performance Delivery**

##### **Question**

Could reassurances and safeguards be given that the Councils outsourced services are working in the best interests of the residents of Southend?

##### **Answer**

In terms of commissioning and the procurement process, this ensures there is a robust assessment of those suppliers who bid for Council contracts. The process looks at the quality of service, the outcomes for residents, how performance will be managed, financial stability as well as how the supplier will meet the Council's and public's requirements. As with all contracts the key then is the management and close working relationship with our suppliers throughout the lifetime of a contract. Across the Council we are continually working to improve contract management processes as well as take account of any legislative changes.

Due to the volume of contracts which the Council holds there will naturally be some suppliers that need closer performance management than others and there may also be occasions where contracts are de-commissioned to ensure that the right supplier is in place and is delivering the best service possible to our residents. Clearly due to the broad range of contracts and types of contracts the Council operates the impact on the public will vary, but in line with the Council's commissioning framework, it is our intention to continually improve and look at innovative ways of ensuring our contracts deliver best value in terms of quality and price.

## **Question 2 from Councillor Keith Evans to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Performance Delivery**

### **Question**

Whilst many staff have been working remotely from home, many residents have become increasingly frustrated and have been struggling to fill in forms electronically and upload documents online, as well as trying to make contact with various departments and services for help, without success.

In light of the proposed money saving staffing restructure, is it anticipated that face to face services will be available to support residents in the foreseeable future?

### **Answer**

The supported self-service area on the ground floor of the civic centre has been open since 19 July and customer service staff are on hand for any support that residents may require. We can assist with uploading of documents and the completion of forms. The Victoria Hub in Victoria Plaza is also available for support specifically with housing benefit and council tax forms.

We are actively reviewing all forms and upload areas of the Council's website, to improve accessibility, and ease of use to improve the experience for our residents.

It is not anticipated to reduce this supported self-service area, and we hope residents continue to access support as they need it.

## **Question 3 from Councillor Dent to the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning (Cllr Burton)**

### **Question**

Having received multiple contacts from residents regarding the number of "extras" ordinarily provided by state schools which have been suspended and not yet resumed in light of the panic, I am concerned at the extent to which children of a less affluent background may be being further disadvantaged as a result.

Could the cabinet member for Children & Learning please provide an update on what the Council is able to do to help address these concerns, and ensure that those who are already vulnerable are not left more so educationally as a result of the pandemic?

### **Answer**

Thank you, Cllr Dent for your very important question. You will recognise that over the past 18 months, schools have been working hard in unprecedented circumstances to ensure that as far as they are able, they provided a safe and supportive learning environment. Much of this time was under covid secure measures not of their making that necessitated the reduction or stopping of many of the added aspects that enriched the curriculum and the lives, and memories of children.

Senior Officers within Education and Public Health have worked throughout this period with all early years, school and college leaders to ensure as far as possible that they could maintain as much of the education provision as they were able. You will be all too aware, nationally, of the impact that this period has had on children, their education and their wellbeing, including those from a less affluent background. Officers have been working for some time with school leaders on what this new Academic Year will look and feel like for pupils. Working with the Headteachers, through Southend Education Board, we have asked those who know the children best, school leaders, to try and diagnose what those “gaps” in learning are.

Unsurprisingly, in primary schools, there was no single aspect that stood out, for example of the curriculum, of gender, or of age group that was common across all schools, with the exception of one aspect. Schools have identified that aspects of a pupil’s resilience, mental health and wellbeing were the most common features that they reported as being potentially adversely affected. They also commented that they and their staff had the skills and training to consider and support an aspect of curriculum gap, for example a topic in mathematics, should there be losses in learning in that respect.

As a result, officers will be led by school leaders to coproduce and put in place a “recovery curriculum” over the next months and years, supporting school staff and parents to enable them to best support pupils’ wellbeing, full engagement, and crucially enjoyment in their learning once again. The exact nature of this support will be devised as time progresses, but alongside some of the opportunity funding provided

by the government, it will be supported by the school improvement funding secured by this council. I know you, and all members, will join with me in wishing the staff and pupils every success over the next months and years.

#### **Question 4 from Councillor Dent to the Cabinet Member for Public Protection (Cllr Terry)**

##### **Question**

Could the cabinet member for Public Protection please provide an update on the roll out, installation and going live of the new CCTV cameras across the Borough?

##### **Answer**

The current CCTV upgrade programme is on schedule and due to be completed in March 2022.

Eurovia our installation/maintenance provider reports that all civil works are complete and that all new CCTV columns have been installed – with the exception of three. These are located on A127 and installation completion is due mid-September. The delay is due to ongoing Highway works at site.

Equipment has been ordered for the new operating system that will be installed at the CCTV control room. This will then be assembled, and a factory acceptance test (FAT) will be fully undertaken at the suppliers test centre before the new operating system goes live.

The project plan has currently scheduled the cameras to go live from November. A priority list of locations will be adopted to ensure that our key hotspot areas go live before other sites across the Borough.

## **Question 5 from Councillor Garne to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health Integration (Cllr Nevin)**

### **Question**

Is the Council's oversight of Healthwatch Southend fit for purpose, considering the resignation of the entire Advisory Board early this year and the apparent failure to appoint replacements?

### **Answer**

The Council's oversight of the Healthwatch Southend service is extensive. To ensure delivery of the Healthwatch Southend service, the Council monitor and measure the performance of Family Action in delivering the Healthwatch Southend service through many methods as part of contract management, including but not limited to:

- Collecting data and reports from Family Action regarding service activity and finance.
- Reviewing how many people engaged with the service and how.
- Reviewing plans for delivery and progress on delivery
- Regular contact with the provider to support and monitor delivery.
- Reviewing anonymised case studies of support given to individuals by Healthwatch Southend to understand outcomes achieved.
- Carrying out benchmarking (making comparisons with the service) with national data regarding funding and delivery of services.
- Quarterly meetings and additional impromptu meetings with the provider to discuss the service, activity, challenges, issues and accomplishments.
- Reviewing national data to understand how Local Healthwatch can be effective in response to existing or prevailing trends in the context of the local area.
- Reviewing national policy and guidance regarding best practice of Local Healthwatch and making comparisons to our current service.
- Receiving advice and guidance from Healthwatch England on quality standards of Local Healthwatch and how best to commission Local Healthwatch services
- Requesting Healthwatch Southend to complete Healthwatch England's "Quality Framework" to self-assess areas for improvement, which includes assessing the quality of Healthwatch Southend's Leadership and Decision Making, Staff and Volunteers, Sustainability

and Resilience, Collaboration, Engagement, Involvement and Reach, Influence and Impact

- Receiving anecdotal feedback from partner organisations, the public sector, third sector and residents to understand their view on the performance of Healthwatch Southend at relevant meetings and in engaging with the service.

In addition to the above, a consultation was held from 9th March 2020 to 24th May 2020, asking residents and professionals what their experience was with the service currently delivered by Family Action and what they felt was important in a Local Healthwatch service in the aim that improvements could be made to the service, including a plan for the commissioning of a new service.

The Health and Social Care Act 2012, as well as national guidance from Healthwatch England, require Local Healthwatch (Healthwatch Southend) to be independent. According to Healthwatch England, to maintain this independence and set local Healthwatch apart from the statutory structures they work within, they need independence of purpose, voice and action. This also means local Healthwatch services require independence from the priorities and agenda of the local authorities that fund those services to enable them to effectively deliver their statutory duties as the consumer champion for health and social care, and where possible, challenge the system or local authority to improve. Healthwatch England works closely with all local Healthwatch, including Healthwatch Southend, to provide leadership, guidance, support and advice, which is an additional level of oversight and quality assurance for the service.

The Healthwatch Southend service is what is known as a hosted model Local Healthwatch (where the service is delivered by an existing social enterprise or non-profit organisation, in this case, Family Action). In order to function as a Healthwatch it is a requirement that lay people and volunteers are included in decision-making and involved in the work of Healthwatch. This means an advisory group or lay people volunteers are required to take part in Healthwatch Southend's decision making beyond the regular main functions of a local Healthwatch (Family Action continue to deliver these regular functions). Following the resignation of the Advisory Board members (also known as an Advisory Group or Community Panel) the Council maintained multiple channels of communication with Family Action to ensure a robust recruitment plan

was put in place as a priority to recruit new volunteers to the Advisory Group. Family Action have since recruited 2 volunteers to these roles, including a chair. Healthwatch England support the methods Family Action are undertaking in recruiting further volunteers for the Healthwatch Southend Advisory Group.

The advisory groups of hosted model Local Healthwatch Services are not constituted, and the relationship between an advisory group volunteer and the hosting organisation is more informal, with less organisational responsibility and legal requirements placed upon them as lay person volunteers, as opposed to staff or trustees of charities. Considering the above, contract managers are satisfied with the planning and procedure undertaken by Family Action to ensure a larger group of volunteers is established as soon as possible, as they aim to attract diverse and representative interest from all parts of the community for this unique role.

### **Question 6 from Councillor Buck to the Cabinet Member for Public Protection**

#### **Question**

Would the Cabinet Member agree that behaviour in a public area by individuals or groups of people, that is felt by innocent 3<sup>rd</sup> parties to be intimidating, potentially threatening and anti-social is unacceptable and action should be taken to prevent those individuals or groups conducting such behaviour in public?

#### **Answer**

As Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Anti Social Behaviour, and any form of threat or intimidation to another, is not acceptable, and I support any work that the Council and its partners undertake, that prevents such activity taking place.

Essex Police and the Council's Community Safety Unit work very closely together through joint patrols, sharing intelligence, and utilising the Council's CCTV system to ensure that such behaviour does not occur in public spaces.

Council and police resources are stretched, particularly in the summer months with high footfall in various parts of the Borough. Therefore, at times, they cannot be everywhere to ensure such behaviour does not occur.

However, when it is reported, both agencies will do their best to respond and deal with the complaint as soon possible, and on most occasions, where groups are committing ASB, or acting in anti social manner, council and police teams will engage and deal with perpetrators. If criminal activity is taking place, then Essex Police would be the main responder.

### **Question 7 from Councillor Buck to the Leader of the Council**

#### **Question**

Would the Leader agree that behaviour in a public area by individuals or groups of people, that is felt by innocent 3<sup>rd</sup> parties to be intimidating, potentially threatening and anti-social is unacceptable and action should be taken to prevent those individuals or groups conducting such behaviour in public?

#### **Answer**

As Leader of the Council, Anti Social Behaviour, and any form of threat or intimidation to another, is not acceptable, and I support any work that the Council and its partners undertake, that prevents such activity taking place.

Essex Police and the Council's Community Safety Unit work very closely together through joint patrols, sharing intelligence, and utilising the Council's CCTV system to ensure that such behaviour does not occur in public spaces.

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where groups are committing ASB, or acting in anti social manner, council and police teams will engage and deal with perpetrators. If criminal activity is taking place, then Essex Police would be the main responder.

### **Question 8 from Councillor Courtenay to the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning**

**(Subject to the waiving of Standings Orders)**

#### **Question**

Would the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning care to make a statement - and apologies to parents and carers - about the debacle that has occurred and, from what parents tell me, is still occurring with the SEND Home to School Transport regime, during the transfer from the old provider to the new joint venture between the Council and a new provider, earlier this month?

#### **Answer**

Thank you Cllr Courtenay for your question, which is unfortunately very timely and necessary. First and foremost I would wish to reiterate a full and sincere apology to all parents and carers who have received a poor service since the start of the new school term. The transition to the provider has been far from smooth and falls well below the standards for which we had hoped.

It is with regret and disappointment that many parents/carers and children have been caused distress due to lack of communication and poor quality of service delivery for the home to school transport service. I fully recognise that any change for SEND pupils can often lead to concern, but despite our planning, the arrangements to properly inform parents, carers and schools was ineffective.

We as the local authority recognise that this is not acceptable and we are working with Vecteo to rectify the situation as soon as we can. Whilst there have been outside influencing factors, and with a national shortage of appropriately licenced drivers and last minute problems with staff transferring over to the new company, the service

was far from smooth and it was not made transparent to parents of these last minute issues to help prepare them for the issues Vecteo were facing.

Please be assured we have officers working on this with Vecteo to try and resolve all the issues that have arisen. We have written to all affected parents apologising and advising we are working with Vecteo to rectify this situation. We will continue to press Vecteo to put in place appropriate arrangements as soon as they can, and to ensure that parents are fully informed should further changes be necessary in the short term.