

COUNCIL – 25 November 2021

Questions from Councillors

Question 1 from Councillor McGlone to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Woodley)

Question

Are there any plans (in any format) for a relief road through St Laurence Ward?

Answer

The Council has long-held aspirations to deliver a new road to serve the East of the Borough so that it can be accessed without adding to the pressure on the roads through the centre of Southend. The details of that route have not yet been settled and no funding is yet available to deliver it so at this time it remains an aspiration. This would be a significant piece of infrastructure which will require central government funding at the relevant time and something that may be needed to support future population, housing and jobs growth (subject to the outcome of the local plan in terms of allocated sites).

A preferred route has not yet been identified and a range of options are being considered, most of which necessarily pass through both Rochford and Southend land in various locations, including St Laurence Ward.

The Council recently consulted on a preparatory stage of the Southend new Local Plan, which posed a number of questions in relation to strategy options, potential sites and several issues facing Southend over the next 20 years. Within the Transport and Access section the consultation included questions on the principle of a new link road and possible connection points. The consultation feedback will inform further work and assessment and strategy preparation.

Question 2 from Councillor McGlone to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture, Tourism and Planning (Cllr Mulrone)

Question

Why was Sidmouth Play Area refurbished without any seating whatsoever?

Answer

The refurbishment of the play area in Sidmouth Avenue has revitalised the facility for local people.

Unfortunately, this play area has historically experienced problems with unwanted congregations, which resulted in the bench in the play area being removed. Due to the previous issues with benches at this site, a new bench was not included in the refurbishment project.

Officers have confirmed that they will organise for a bench to be installed in the play area. However, this provision will need to be reviewed if antisocial congregations occur as a result of the bench.

Question 3 from Councillor Cowdrey to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture, Tourism and Planning (Cllr Mulrone)

Question

It has been brought to my attention that Sea Holly (*Eryngium Maritimum*) is growing on our foreshores, with a real increase in growth from Thorpe Bay right along the Esplanade. The established plants are now dropping seeds.

I am aware that this is a protected species of plant, proving protection for other more scarce foreshore plants such as Sea Sandwort and Sean Bindweed.

Can the Cabinet Member please advise whether these plants are a naturally occurring phenomenon or whether they were originally planted as part of an alternative sea defence or other environmental strategy by the Council or other body?

Answer

Our foreshore is important to the borough for both tourism and biodiversity. The area has both national and international protected status due to its environmental significance. A recent survey of areas of our beaches found a number of coastal plants have been established, helping support birds and invertebrates.

The council has not undertaken any projects that have involved planting coastal plants for our sea defences. However, the coastal plants that have established on their own accord, are thought to be a benefit to coastal defences.

Although no planting has taken place, a current externally funded project, Sustainable and Resilient Coastal Cites (SARCC) is investigating taking a hybrid approach towards coastal engineering through the merging of traditional hard defences with green infrastructure; the pilot scheme will test the success of this approach.

Question 4 from Councillor Keith Evans to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Woodley)

Question

Shortly after the current administration took control of the Council, due to the backlog of requests regarding highways projects and issues, and then the subsequent reorganisation of the highways department, it was announced that there was to be a two-year moratorium on any new parking or highways projects/issues being considered.

Can the Cabinet Member confirm when this moratorium was revoked?

Answer

The parking and highways service has a duty of care to ensure the highway is safe for its users. The moratorium was put in place (and is still in place) to ensure only schemes relating to safety were considered to enable the service to deal with the backlog of requests. All requests received by the service are triaged to understand the need for implementation.

Question 5 from Councillor Keith Evans to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Woodley)

Question

Could the Cabinet Member confirm the number of new schemes and requests made by Councillors that have been considered, which had not already been 'logged' and in the 'system', prior to the moratorium on parking and highways projects and issues being put in place?

Answer

In May 2019 there were 77 outstanding schemes of those, 22 have now been moved into the junction protection programme. Of the remaining 55, 34 have been closed, 21 remain incomplete as of September 2021.

The service currently has 83 outstanding requests 40 of these on initial investigation are deemed to be non-safety requests and are not being progressed currently and 27 are deemed to be safety related which are now into the second stage of feasibility; with 16 still to be looked at.

There are currently 4 schemes still on the list from 2018, 17 from 2019, 12 from 2020 and to date 50 for 2021.

The service does not have any information on schemes that have not been logged or in the system.

Question 6 from Councillor Dear to the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning (Cllr Burton)

Question

At Full Council on 9th September 2021 the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning apologised for the debacle of the transfer of provider of the Council's Home to School (SEND) service. Six weeks on, we are still hearing of problems from numerous parents. Whilst his apology was welcome, parents want action.

When will this be sorted out?

Answer

Thank you for your questions, Councillors. As I stated at the last full council, we agreed that the initial transition from the previous provider to the new contract holder, Vecteo, was far from satisfactory, for which I then apologised. I absolutely recognise apologies without actions are meaningless, which is why I required officers within the council to work both directly with Vecteo staff, but also independently to monitor their actions that should be improving the arrangements for the majority of families and children.

These initial include regular daily reporting from Vecteo of any residual or new concerns raised by families including, where required. escalating these to the appropriate officer; greater consistency of staffing by Vecteo; ensuring all drivers and passenger assistants have a basic level of appropriate first aid training; and importantly establishing far better communication channels with both individual parents and the parents as a whole.

Whilst it is our understanding that there have been some improvements from the poor situation at the start of the contract, we also recognise that this is not a consistent picture for all families, and a small number of concerns continue to emerge.

As a result, we, as a council, in effect the “client” to the transport provider, are putting in place further and more robust measures to ensure that the improvements are felt for all families on a consistent basis. These latest measures include asking PWC to undertake a full audit of the contractual requirements placed upon Vecteo to ensure full compliance with the contract; further meetings of executive officers from the council with the parent company of Vecteo, London Hire; and if required bringing in additional senior management capacity to Vecteo to drive required improvements forward at the pace families rightly should expect.

Question 7 from Councillor Nelson to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Service and Performance Delivery (Cllr Collins)

Question

Could the Cabinet Member explain what went wrong in the two and a half years (between March 2019, the Cabinet decision to appoint Joint Venture Partner, and September 2021, the delayed commencement of the service) with the procurement, contractual obligations, and preparation for the delivery of the Council's Passenger Transport Service, in particular, that of the Home to School (SEND) service?

Answer

Following the Council's decision to create a joint venture company an extensive procurement exercise was undertaken to select an appropriate private sector partner. London Hire Community Services Ltd were successful in their bid and Vecteo was formed. The Joint Venture took over the running of the services in March 2020 and continued to use predominantly the same supply chain of sub-contractors to undertake the physical transportation work.

In April 2021 Vecteo announced that it intended to self-deliver transport services to 3 of the busiest schools. The subcontractors were informed, and a tender process was undertaken for those areas that were not to be self-delivered. Where self-delivery was to be undertaken then TUPE discussions were entered into with the existing subcontractors. All subcontracts expired at the end of July 2021 and new ones came into operation in September 2021, as did the Vecteo self-delivery operation.

The vast majority of the issues experienced within the first 2 weeks were in the areas that Vecteo had decided to self-deliver. These problems were created by a variety of matters but the key ones being Lack of appropriately trained/qualified staff (caused by TUPE issues and the current national shortage of drivers/skilled staff) and the lack of engagement/communication with parents/careers (caused by Vecteo resources being deployed onto staff recruitment).

Other matters such as the global covid pandemic, and contractual delays earlier in the process certainly did not assist a smooth transition,

but in themselves are not causes of the issues experienced. The lessons learnt review is due to be finished shortly and this will cover the matters in more detail.

The level of service delivered by Vecteo has significantly improved over recent weeks, but improvements are still required in certain areas, and we are working closely with them to ensure they are delivered.

Question 8 from Councillor Cox to the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning (Cllr Burton)

Question

At Full Council on 9th September 2021 the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning apologised for the debacle of the transfer of provider of the Council's Home to School (SEND) service. Six weeks on, we are still hearing of problems from numerous parents. Whilst his apology was welcome, parents want action.

When will this be sorted out?

Answer

I refer to my answer in response to Question 6 from Councillor Dear.

Question 9 from Councillor Boyd to the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning (Cllr Burton)

Question

At Full Council on 9th September 2021 the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning apologised for the debacle of the transfer of provider of the Council's Home to School service for SEND children and vulnerable adults. Six weeks on, we are still hearing of problems from numerous parents. Whilst his apology was welcome, parents would like action.

When will this be sorted out?

Answer

I refer to my answer in response to Question 6 from Councillor Dear.

Question 10 from Councillor Nelson to the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning (Cllr Burton)

Question

At Full Council on 9th September 2021 the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning apologised for the debacle of the transfer of provider of the Council's Home to School (SEND) service. Six weeks on, we are still hearing of problems from numerous parents. Whilst his apology was welcome, parents want action.

When will this be sorted out?

Answer

I refer to my answer in response to Question 6 from Councillor Dear.

Question 11 from Councillor Buck to the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning (Cllr Burton)

Question

At Full Council on 9th September 2021 the Cabinet Member for Children & Learning apologised for the debacle of the transfer of provider of the Council's Home to School (SEND) service. Six weeks on, we are still hearing of problems from numerous parents. Whilst his apology was welcome, parents want action. When will this be sorted out?

Answer

I refer to my answer in response to Question 6 from Councillor Dear.

Question 12 from Councillor Dent to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Woodley)

Question

Could the cabinet member for tell me when was the last time rules around residents parking schemes were reviewed, specifically the limit on the number visitor permits?

Answer

A new policy for Controlled Parking Zones was adopted in January 2021 which included a review of visitor permits; however, with any policy we continually review decision to ensure they reflect the requirements of the residents and the borough.

Question 13 from Councillor Dent to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture, Tourism and Planning (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

Could the cabinet member tell me how the quality and standard of service provided by Fusion is monitored and assessed, in particular in regards to the reopening of services post lockdown?

Answer

Fusion Lifestyle report to The Council at regular reviews regarding a variety of operational data such as customer feedback, number of participants, accidents, incidents, financial, repairs and maintenance. The data is challenged where necessary and is also used to inform changes to the services provided.

With regard to the reopening of services after lockdown, all sites had to be recommissioned and staffed again following redundancies. Fusion reopened SLTC initially and then all sites withing a few weeks and are operating on a demand led basis. This approach is to maximise financial viability given the leisure market continuing to adapt to significant change.

Question 14 from Councillor Courtenay to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Performance Delivery (Cllr Collins)

Question

Could the Cabinet Member explain what went wrong in the two and a half years (between March 2019, the Cabinet decision to appoint Joint Venture Partner, and September 2021, the delayed commencement of the service) with the procurement, contractual obligations and preparation for the delivery of the Council's Passenger Transport Service, in particular, that of the Home to School (SEND) service?

Answer

I refer to my answer in response to Question 7 from Councillor Nelson.

Question 15 from Councillor Courtenay to the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning (Cllr Burton)

Question

At Full Council on 9th September 2021 the Cabinet Member for Children & Learning apologised for the debacle of the transfer of provider of the Council's Home to School (SEND) service. Six weeks on, we are still hearing of problems from numerous parents. Whilst his apology was welcome, parents want action. When will this be sorted out?

Answer

I refer to my answer in response to Question 6 from Councillor Dear.

Question 16 from Councillor Garne to the Cabinet Member for Children and Learning (Cllr Burton)

Question

What does the Executive Councillor for Children and Learning consider to be the most important feature in the provision of home to school transport for vulnerable children?

Answer

Thank you, Cllr Garne, for your question.

As I stated in previous meetings, safe and effective transport to and from school that allows pupils to arrive ready to learn is fundamental. In this respect, to ensure that Vecteo improve on the poor performance, we have required them to put in place a range of measures including appropriate risk assessments and better communication with parents and families.

Question 17 from Councillor Cowdrey to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Performance Delivery (Cllr Collins)

Question

I am aware that work is ongoing on the Southend Borough Council Website and would like to know what, in addition to the usual accessibility measures such as changing font size and translation widgets, measure have been taken or are planned to increase the sites accessibility for disabled residents and visitors as well as those who are less digitally able?

Answer

Significant work has been undertaken and continues to be undertaken to ensure the corporate website is accessible to all residents.

May 2020 – the entire website was relaunched on to a new platform, which meant that back-end technical accessibility criteria, required by law, were met (WCAG2.1 AA criteria). This included:

- Code behind buttons readable by screen readers for those with sight impairments
- Colour contrast on the web design increased to comply with the regulations
- Simplified user journeys, especially to core content
- Ability to navigate the site using a keyboard, for those who are unable to use a mouse
- Focus for navigation visible
(and many more technical back-end improvements)

A new on-site search tool was added to improve the user experience in finding content

- Increased ability our end to modify search results, ensuring core content is as easy as possible to find

On-page content has been, and continues to be systematically re-worked to ensure

- Reading age of 9
- Images have alt-text for those who can't see them
- Graphs or diagrams have captions to explain what the data is and means

Pdfs – removing wherever possible, and placing content on web pages where it is easily found and read, and is accessible to screen reading software

- over 3,000 pdfs have been removed from the website
- This work is ongoing due to so many pdfs being on the site (this is a challenge, but one we are working through)
- New sections created for content previously buried in pdfs, for example: [The Future of Southend High Street – Southend-on-Sea Borough Council](#) and [Council Tax Bands and Charges – Southend-on-Sea Borough Council](#) and [Active and Involved – Annual Report 2020/21 – Southend-on-Sea Borough Council](#)

Accessibility statement:

- This was prepared, has been audited by central Government and sits on the website for anyone to view

Promotion of the need for accessibility across the organisation

- Case by case: we continue to educate all service areas that we deal with on the need for accessibility, when they need content on the website.
- Regular emails: All-staff emails monthly, pushing accessibility, the law, how to create accessible content etc
- Training organised on accessible pdfs – the second round of external training for individuals who produce regular reports takes place next week

Audits and testing:

- Members of the public and the SEND community were involved in the initial testing of the website and changes were made prior to launch based on their findings.
- Government Digital Service audited the website from Jan 2021 to Apr 2021. We made some changes on the back of this, and the GDS have said there is no further work needed on their part
- We followed this up with a deeper external testing phase/audit by The Shaw Trust (who use people with a range of disabilities to audit the site). We are currently working through their findings.

Feedback

- We receive comments via the Govmetric tool and make improvements to the site as a result.
- Any feedback on specific content will always be addressed by our team as we strive for further usability improvements.

The accessibility of the corporate website is a key priority in our team and we continue to make improvements to ensure we end up with a website that is best of class in accessibility, and that ALL our residents can use. It has been and still is a huge challenge, but we are making enormous progress, and despite having been signed off by central Government on this, we continue to audit, fix and improve.