

## COUNCIL – 24<sup>th</sup> March 2022

### Councillor Questions

(1) **Question from Councillor K Evans to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)**

**Question**

Could the cabinet member confirm when the weekend charges in the pay and display bays within the Hospital Area Resident Parking (Zone H) were introduced?

**Answer**

The weekend charges in the pay and display bays within the Hospital Area Resident Parking (Zone H) were introduced in April 2021.

(2) **Question from Councillor K Evans to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)**

**Question**

Could the cabinet member confirm if there are financial penalty clauses which can be levied in respect of overruns and defects with regard to street works inspections?

**Answer**

The highway authority will issue Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN's) for reinstatement defects and signing, lighting and guarding inadequacies. There are also charges for over running the agreed duration of a permit. Since April 2021 there have been 1272 defects issued to utilities totalling £51,615.00 in charges, 2041 FPN's issued totalling £168,040.00, 158 over runs totalling £49,150.00 and a further estimated £57,000.00 of over runs yet to be agreed.

The highway authority also complete agreed sample inspections for the year creating £49,940.00 in fees.

**(3) Question from Councillor M Berry to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Gilbert)**

**Question**

Please can you give an as accurate as possible indication of the financial costs to the Council of arranging and running an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council, such as the one convened on 17th February?

I appreciate that the attendance of Councillors costs nothing apart from our time, but given that there are costs in terms of preparation and attendance for the Chief Executive, Borough Solicitor and other senior Council Officers, staff time and printing costs in arranging the agenda and distributing papers, cleaning the room and sanitising the desks before and afterwards and various ancillary expenses I feel that Members of the Council and members of the public should be aware of the extent of those.

**Answer**

Under staff costs, 'attendance at committees' is a requirement of the role for most council officers. The council operates a Flexi Policy for staff to manage their working pattern to balance the demands of their role with a work-life balance. There is no overtime payment in operation, so no additional costs. In some cases, flexi time is taken back.

In relation to the specific attendance at the Extraordinary Meeting of the Council on 17 February 2022, the council staff present included:

- Chief Executive
- Executive Director (Legal and Democratic Services)
- Democratic Services support staff
- Communications staff
- ICT/Webcast support staff
- Facilities Management staff

Based on a 4-hour period, the cost of the above people resources is a total of £1061.52.

It is worth highlighting that staff typically manage a workload during the day and where there is an unusually high demand of committee meetings, including the Extraordinary Meeting of the Council on 17 February 2022, the lead-in time to prepare for the meetings and the flexi time taken back by some officers can lead to service pressures.

**(4) Question from Councillor M Berry to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Gilbert)**

**Question**

Please can you give information on the policy for providing access to council services and application/report forms for people who are unable to use computers or other internet-enabled devices for one reason or another?

Several instances have been brought to my attention of residents being told by council staff that the service they need to use can only be accessed online. While I appreciate that organisations such as the Hub can assist in many cases, or I and other councillors can take our laptops round to the residents and fill in the forms for them, that is far from ideal. A lot of residents would much rather not disclose their personal and financial information to volunteers or other third parties, and in any case what they really want is the simplicity and confidentiality of a paper form they can take their time over and post to the council.

**Answer**

We absolutely need to support people who are digitally uncertain or excluded and addressing that fully is a long-term approach which is being addressed via social value, connectivity strategies, education and training, the replacement of the MySouthend platform, and other programs and workstreams.

In the shorter term, we have taken some actions that do address residents access and ability to access forms:

- For residents who are challenged with equipment, there are computers called kiosks available in the Civic and libraries which residents can use. We recently upgraded these to ensure that they are secure for residents. Support for residents on using these is available at these sites.
- If a user is unable to use the MySouthend digital form, they are able to call the contact centre, who will guide them through the form they are trying to submit - either mirroring their actions onscreen to guide or customer services can submit the form on the customers behalf. If this is not acceptable to some residents and the paper form can be mailed to them for them to complete and send back.
- As part of the quick wins promised in October 2021 for the MySouthend replacement project, we have updated the language and requirements of the forms on MySouthend to make them easier to understand and complete. At the same time the team have been working through these to make them available in printed form.

**(5) Question from Councillor D Garne to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Gilbert)**

**Question**

The new corporate branding and coat of arms appear to contain no words of the traditional heraldic type or a modern version thereof.

Has no consideration been given to these possibilities and are suggestions welcomed?

**Answer**

I believe that Cllr Garne is referring to the modern coat of arms concept, one of four concepts discussed at Cabinet on 14 March and then Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 16 March. The matter has been referred back to Cabinet so unfortunately the public and wider engagement planned will not now take place until after the election.

As I stated at Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 16 March, I will be happy to listen to suggestions and ideas as part of the engagement process.

It is important to emphasise that the traditional coat of arms will not be replaced or altered in any way and will continue to be retained for appropriate civic occasions as usual.

**(6) Question from Councillor M Dent to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)**

**Question**

Could the cabinet member please detail what review and improvement works are taking place regarding levels of street lighting across the city?

**Answer**

The 2022/23 Annual Street Lighting 'Infill Programme' is yet to be finalised and will also be subject to be ability to obtain the required materials. Steel was in short supply last financial year and the number of columns available to purchase was dramatically reduced.

A list of requests for increases to street lighting is maintained. All requests received are surveyed by an engineer, the lowest lit areas/those with the largest spacing between columns are then prioritised first.

**(7) Question from Councillor Dent to the Leader of the Council (Cllr Gilbert)**

**Question**

Could the Leader of the Council please tell me what, if any, measures are currently in place to mitigate Southend Councillors being forced to miss Council meetings due to contracting COVID-19?

## **Answer**

Under the Coronavirus Act 2020, Remote Meeting Regulations were made to enable local authorities to hold meetings remotely to 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021. The Regulations ceased to be in force from that date and local authorities had to revert to in person meetings for Council, Cabinet, committees and sub-committees.

The Government has consistently maintained that primary legislation is required to change the law and have cited a lack of parliamentary time as a reason for not bringing forward the necessary legislation. Various local authority organisations have lobbied the Government to change the law to allow remote meetings to take place, not only because of the effect of Covid on the democratic process but also because there are positive and wider reasons for remote and hybrid meetings.

At the meeting of Place Scrutiny Committee on 29 November 2021, Councillors expressed concern at the rising levels of Covid, including the levels of the omicron variant and highlighted the potential risks of holding physical meetings. Following the meeting, a letter signed by the four Group Leaders was sent to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities requesting him to consider the reinstatement of the provisions for remote and/or hybrid meetings as a matter of urgency.

While the law does not permit meetings of the Council, Cabinet, committees sub-committees to be held virtually at present, it is possible for informal meetings such as working parties to be held remotely or in a hybrid format and the necessary arrangements have been made to enable meetings of this nature to take place in either form.

(8) **Question from Councillor D Cowan to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)**

## **Question**

Could the portfolio holder please let me know what the process is for utilities companies applying to block lanes/whole roads and what is factored into drawing up a diversionary route?

### **Answer**

A statutory three months' notice must be given by a utility company as a traffic order will need to be made to facilitate works unless these are emergency works. Full traffic management and diversionary route plans are supplied, reviewed and agreed by officers whereby traffic is diverted via similar usage roads. A utility company may temporarily block a lane for grabbing away material for a maximum of fifteen minutes and cannot return to complete such an activity again at the same location for one hour upon completion.

(9) **Question from Councillor D Cowan to the Cabinet Member for Transport, Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Wakefield)**

### **Question**

When the Bell Junction reopened it was said that traffic would be monitored for a period to see how many vehicles continued to use Denton Approach and the attached residential estate as a short cut. Could the portfolio holder please let me know how this monitoring is going and if it is still ongoing?

### **Answer**

A traffic survey of Denton Approach and the surrounding area has been undertaken. The details will be compared to the 'before' survey and a report produced recommending any appropriate action.