

SOUTHEND ON SEA CITY COUNCIL
Council – Thursday 23rd March 2023
Questions from members of the Public

1. Question from Mr David Webb to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

What type of equipment will be put in each playground during 2023-2024 and how much will each playground cost to be improved?

Answer

The Council has allocated a capital parks improvement programme with an approximate value of £1.3 million. The delivery of this programme is currently being tendered to interested landscape designers. At this stage there is no set value for each site but playground improvements are being focused on the following sites:- Priory Park, Bournes Green Park, Chalkwell Park, Belfairs Park, Southchurch Park, Friars Park and Oakwood Park. The process will consider the design and equipment for each of these sites. In addition, there is Levelling Up Funding of £85,000 which has been allocated to improving play facilities in Milton Gardens. We will also be looking to make improvements to some smaller playgrounds on a wider City programme.

2. Question from Mr David Webb to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

What ways will the joint administration push forward on our green city ambition and how much will it cost?

Answer

Thank you for your question. We will be delivering a programme of carbon mitigation and climate resilience projects which will include building retrofit, electric vehicle infrastructure, coastal resilience and community engagement. The Climate Change programme capital budget of £1.5 million will be used and the council will continue to access grant funding where feasible.

3. Question from Sarah Yapp to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

We have been very concerned about the management of the urban trees within the city.

With the emphasis on the poor air quality of Southend and the knowledge that our children's health is suffering with above the national average levels of asthma in the city, knowing that trees filter our air of the dangerous PM2.5s that are affecting our children's lungs and brain development. Added to this there is a new emphasis on the Urban Heat Stress and we know that due to their physiology children are unable to regulate their body temperatures. We also know that urban tree canopy of mature trees can help reduce street temperature by several degrees, it seems counter-intuitive that we have managed to remove so many thousands of trees within Southend.

Can we have an urgent halting of tree removal until air quality monitoring is completed and the urban heat stress strategy is implemented?

Answer

The Council has 20,000 street trees which are regularly inspected and maintained. It is inevitable with age and modern conditions some trees will fail and need attention which may include felling. The Council is not removing thousands of trees. Between 2019/20 and 2021/22 it has been necessary to remove 680 trees; however, 1,945 trees have been planted. This represents a net gain of 1,265 new trees over that period. Thousands more have been maintained to ensure their longevity. Trees are only removed after rigorous procedures by qualified arboricultural staff when no other management option is feasible. We are continually looking at new options for retaining trees, if at all possible. In the vast majority of cases trees are only removed when they are dead, dying, dangerous, diseased or damaged and present an identified risk to residents or are the subject of a valid insurance claim against the council for property damage. The council would be failing in its duty both legally and morally if it retained trees known to be hazardous.

The issue of felling of private trees is however a more prevalent and deep concern to the council and we offer advice to residents on how to care for and maintain their garden trees. It is also the main way of building up the canopy cover. The council being only able to plant on its own land of course.

The question of highway works affecting trees is a balance between the council's desire to retain trees and the duty of care to ensure safety of pavements for residents, especially the elderly and those with disabilities, blind and partially sighted, mobility scooter users and those with children's buggies and prams. Other means of protecting trees which are causing pavement heave and cracks etc will be sought before any decision is taken to fell which is the last resort.

As to the tree canopy our immediate target is 15% coverage but there will be some areas where this is not possible and others where it is exceeded. When a tree is removed it is recorded for replanting to take place, if possible, in the immediate vicinity but if not in another more suitable area, as can be seen we have kept to our commitment of planting 2 for 1. Far more than previous administrations.

There are a number of issues relating to replanting such as the presence of utilities and potential contamination from a diseased tree which prevent immediate replanting in the same spot.

I think it would be fair here to state reasons why we will not remove or prune trees - because we are often asked to do so.

If the tree is blocking TV and satellite reception or a view, causing shading or blocking sunlight reaching solar panels placed on a neighbouring private property.

The tree is considered to be producing too much pollen.

The tree is lightly touching telephone lines.

4. Question from Sarah Yapp to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

I would like to know what the arrangement for payments and contracts with the monopoly that the Council has with Tree Fella so that we can be clear that there is not internal corruption occurring?

Answer

The arboricultural maintenance contract was subject to open competition. The contract was awarded to Treefella following a careful evaluation of the quality and price of the bids submitted to determine which of the competing companies offered the best value for money. This contract (arboricultural works) is to be advertised for open competition again later this year.

The costs for all works are determined by a schedule of rates which sets out the different kinds of tree work carried out. Work is specified by the council's own, qualified, and experienced Arboricultural Officers based on the condition and needs of the tree specific to its form, habit, and location. All works orders are retained on the council's database and they form an important record of work to each tree. All invoices for payment are checked for accuracy by the Arboricultural team leader and authorised by a separate Officer. Payments are made electronically. All council budgets and payments are subject to periodic audit.

5. Question from Brian Ayling to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture and Tourism (Cllr Mulroney)

Question

How much money has the Council paid in compensation regarding planning applications over the past five years?

Answer

In the last 5 years the Council has not paid any money as compensation related to planning applications.