

SOUTHEND ON SEA CITY COUNCIL
Council – Thursday 23rd March 2023

Questions from Councillors

1. Question from Councillor Dent to the Cabinet Member for Public Protection (Cllr Terry)

Question

Reckless behaviour from cyclists and users of e-scooters on the pavements and pedestrianised areas of Southend continue to cause great concern for residents.

Could the Cabinet Member please outline the measures that the Council is taking to address this, and to make pedestrianised areas of the city safer for everyone?

Answer

Prohibitions on cycling and e-scooters in pedestrianised areas were additional behaviours that were added to the renewal of the town centre Public Space Protection Order (PSPO). Community Safety Officers and Police can issue Fixed Penalty Notices of £100 as part of an enforcement process to address use of them in the prohibited area.

Community Safety Officers also have Community Safety Accreditation Scheme (CSAS) powers which enable them to address these issues across the city as part of a targeted enforcement process with Police colleagues.

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

Question

Could the Cabinet Member please provide an update regarding the Jazz Centre UK, its future at the Beecroft Gallery, and efforts to find an alternative venue for the centre?

Answer

Members of the Jazz Centre UK (JCUK) have recently been providing information regarding the council's decision to ask them to relocate after many years of rent-free space as well as free utilities and calls on Council assistance, well beyond what it has been able to make available to other small organisations. After numerous letters, freedom of information requests, all focused on the situation from JCUK perspective, I wanted to reiterate our position to balance the narrative.

JCUK grew out of an initial National Jazz Archive project which is still in operation in Loughton. The two organisations have some crossover but JCUK in Southend has developed a unique offer including displays and outreach work including education and participation. The Council has been supportive of the project and generously provided free accommodation in the Beecroft building for over 7 years under a service level agreement (SLA) recognising the value of the art form and potential footfall and engagement. The relationship has been difficult at times with the gallery operating under council management and the shared space seeing live music and events that are not necessarily consistent with our main offer as a gallery.

Different cultural behaviours between Council staff and jazz centre representatives have inevitably created some friction, but nevertheless we have continued despite these challenges and this has no bearing whatsoever to the council serving notice.

When space at the Beecroft was initially offered, the intention was for the museum service to move to a new seafront location. The costs of that project spiralled considerably beyond original expectations and made the plans unviable. This decision whilst inevitable, has perpetuated the inability of the Council to present Southend's heritage offer and art collection in a way which shows it to its best advantage and precludes expansion to cater for our new and exciting internationally renowned collections. It is this inability to manage our spaces in the most effective way for the benefit of the museum service and the public that has led to the current decision. We are currently blocking up large parts of the Central Museum and offsite storage and unable to tell our significant stories effectively. This can no longer go on.

The council meets with JCUK regularly and for the last two years we have raised the issue of the increasing costs and financial challenges to local authorities. JCUK as a charity stated that they did not have funds to pay rent and a formula to contribute through commission on sales items was agreed. An initial proposal by the council was rejected and the Council lowered the commission amount and a review after a year was agreed. At the end of the first year, £84 was the total commission. During the period of support, the contribution of space and support based on external valuation is £193,000

Within the SLA conditions, there is a notice period of 12 months, and we are now in this period. Whilst a rent contribution has subsequently been offered, it goes no way to covering the costs to the council of the potential need to find museum space itself elsewhere or solve our core issue which is to show more of our collection and reduce our storage requirements.

An alternative space in the Beecroft has been offered which is more suitable from a gallery and council perspective and more representative of the rent JCUK say they can now pay. The JCUK have advised that this space is not suitable for their needs.

The museum service is now preparing an exciting future for the heritage collection and Beecroft Gallery. Bringing items out from storage to be able to tell residents and visitors about our fascinating heritage including our internationally relevant collections. Our project which itself will attract interest from national funding agencies will free many items from storage and reduce costs to the service and ultimately, the taxpayer.

Whilst the Jazz Centre UK is a very worthwhile project and brings some benefits, it is not Southend specific and the City Council needs to prioritise the City's heritage all set against a backdrop of difficult financial decisions.

For JCUK to thrive it needs an operating model to support itself, wherever it may move to, merchandising and revenue generation, memberships and evening performances and refreshments. This is just not possible in the Beecroft basement. And whilst the Council continues to support the JCUK in its search for an alternative site – of which several have been suggested – the Council and museum service are here to provide a service for all its citizens.

3. Question from Councillor Keith Evans to the Cabinet Member for Economic Recovery, Regeneration and Housing (Cllr Gilbert)

Question

Can the Cabinet Member tell me when residents of South Essex Homes were consulted regarding the increase in service charge?

Answer

The service charge increases being introduced in April were considered as part of the draft budget published online on 5th January 2023, prior to this draft budget being tabled at Cabinet on 12th January. This provided the opportunity for suggestions and amendments to the proposed budget to be made before the publication of the final Housing Revenue Account budget and its consideration at Cabinet and Full Council on 14th and 23rd February respectively.

In keeping with the process followed annually there is no additional consultation with council tenants undertaken directly in regard to annual service charge uplifts, as this does not relate to any change of process or the introduction of new elements to the service charge but relates only to levying the actual costs of providing these services. As is well known, this has increased significantly due mainly to the global energy crisis. Where changes occur outside of this annual norm, such as any in-year uplifts, these are subject to additional consultation with tenants.

4. Question from Councillor Keith Evans to the Cabinet Member for Asset Management and Inward Investment (Cllr Collins)

Question

How much profit does the golf course in Belfairs Park generate for the Council?

Answer

Belfairs golf course does not generate any profit for the council. The council is currently subsidising the service by around £40,000 net each year.