

Council – 14th December 2023

Councillor Questions

1. Councillor Ayles asks a question of the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cox)

Question

At the last meeting of the Southend City full Council I asked a simple question of how Southend City Council could spend £100,000 on two small events when the Council struggles to fix broken fences, replace broken safety signs and refuse to invest in Belfairs Park, not even clean signs.

The response was that substantial investment had been put into Belfairs ward, e.g. the tennis courts have been upgraded. As far as I can tell the tennis courts of Belfairs Park have not even been swept.

So would the cabinet holder explain how much of a substantial amount was spent in Belfairs Park, as asked in the original question?

Answer

The Council was successful in attracting funding from the Lawn Tennis Association for the refurbishment of tennis courts across the city. This project included an investment of £57,700 for the courts in Bonchurch Park which sit within Belfairs ward. The courts in Belfairs Park fell outside of the financial scope of the LTA project with an estimated refurbishment cost of more than £90,000.

Additionally, the council has allocated a capital budget of £1 million to refurbish playgrounds across the city. The project includes the refurbishment of one of the playgrounds in Belfairs Park. The detailed plans are currently being finalised but are likely to see an investment of £100,000 in this playground.

2. Councillor Aylen asks a second question of the Cabinet Member for Arts, Culture, Heritage and Leisure (Cllr Jarvis)

Question

The Carvair airplane was designed and constructed at Southend Airport, featured in many films including gold finger. A carvair returned the winning Monte Carlo BMC minis. Carvair to Southend is the same as the pier is to Southend. An important part for the city's history. A group of volunteers have recovered the last known to exist Carvair cockpit and it's under restoration. However, it needs a home to finish the restoration and to put this important part of Southend city's proud history on show, where the public can view and learn all about Southend's involvement in Aviation.

The Cabinet have been asked for help. The response was why not ask the Vulcan trust if you can put the cockpit there. As I understand this has been refused and the Vulcan is completely separate to the Carviar.

So, the question to the Cabinet Member is will they support and assist this important project to find a fitting home?

Answer

The Carvair is indeed an important part of the city's history and a great example of the rich aviation heritage locally. I am delighted that a group of volunteers are currently restoring the last known existing cockpit and are keen to see how it can be displayed locally.

Due to the size of indoor environment required, and the need for security, there are clearly challenges in finding a site in Southend which would enable members of the public to access this historic piece.

Unfortunately, the Council does not have a suitable site in which we could host such an exhibit. We are however committed where possible to supporting the group and its ambitions and are happy to try and connect any potential partners who may be able to support the group with a venue or find a position in an aviation museum, where the cockpit could be displayed to full advantage, and be appreciated by the public.

3. Councillor Cowan asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Parking (Cllr Buck)

Question

According to the latest financial report, the Council is overspent in parking enforcement and highways by £967k. Are there plans to reduce this overspend in-year and how much will it be reduced by?

Answer

The nature of parking and highways is such that spend and income fluctuates throughout the year. However, as a matter of course the Council works to manage its budgets in a proactive, forward-thinking manner. Work being done to reduce this overspend includes tendering of the new parking enforcement contract, continued work to deliver value for money through all parking infrastructure (for example reviewing which machines we continue to service), a review of all card payments into the Council to drive economies of scale and the increase in the number of car parking spaces in high volume areas.

4. Councillor Cowan asks a second question of the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cox)

Question

Which departments and services does the Leader believe the council should be looking at first for service redesign and restructuring as part of the transformation programme and which does he believe we should be looking at last?

Answer

Thank you for your question. The Transformation Programme is in the early stages of development. The priority for change is on the operational structures of the largest and most pressurised services.

I will take service redesign and restructuring separately as there are different approaches.

The initial phase of service redesign has been identified through the budget challenge. The longlist of efficiencies and savings identified

services that need redesign to either reduce costs or improve demand management.

In the case of restructuring, some services are restructuring in response to the recruitment freeze that has been in place for some time or the Voluntary Redundancy process; as vacant posts are deleted, structures need to change to accommodate. Other restructures will follow the outcome of service design. There is also a focus on support services where efficiencies can be made to protect the further reduction in frontline services. There are a set of organisational design principles in place for all restructures which ensures a consistent approach is taken.

5. Councillor George asks a question of the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cox)

Question

What impact will the Government's decision announced in the Autumn Statement to increase the National Living Wage have on the Council's budgetary position particularly in light of increased demand for adult social care and children's services?

Answer

Councillor George thank you for your question.

The National Living Wage (NLW) has been increased from £10.42 to £11.44 per hour, a rise of 9.79% from 1st April 2024.

The estimated financial impact from the increase in NLW for 2024/25 based on the current costs of local delivery of our range of adults and children's social care services is around £5.5M. Other third-party contractors' costs will also be impacted by the increased NLW, it is currently estimated that this additional cost would be around £1m in 2024/25.

These increased costs will form part of the budget setting process for 2024/25 and one of the reasons why we are seeing a significant increase in the Council's medium term financial plan position.

6. Councillor Richardson asks a question of the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cox)

Question

Does the Leader believe that this council still has reputational issues that are preventing us from recruiting and retaining the staff we need, leading to an overuse of agency staff?

Answer

Work has been undertaken across the Council to improve our reputation as a good employer. We work closely with our resourcing provider to ensure external applicants are aware of the benefits of working for Southend. There is evidence of effective cross party working such as the Chief Executive appointment and the budget challenge sessions which demonstrated improved working relationships. There is also stability within the Corporate Leadership Team and this has helped to promote effective working and clear and consistent management. Communications have improved and all of these factors will support the retention of our staff.

The number of agency staff has reduced. A majority of agency workers are in the nationally hard to fill areas of statutory provision. The management team are continuing to drive down the use of agency workers across the Council.

7. Councillor O'Connor asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Learning (Cllr Boyd)

Question

Predicted overspend in Children's Services is going up. What preventative action is this administration taking to reduce costs in the long-run?

Answer

Thank you for your question. There was in fact a slight reduction in the projected overspend in Children's Services from period 4 to period 6 reported through the Period 6 Council position report.

Much of the current overspend is due to the cost of the placements for children we care for. We currently place children in residential placements, Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements and in Council's House Fostering services. The current cost of external residential care placements for the children we care for is placing considerable financial strain on the Children's social care budget.

This is a national and regional issue as well as a local one. At the end of the 2019/2020 financial year, we had just under approximately 330 Children in our care, an avg. of 33 in residential care and a spend on residential placements was just over £6m. As of the end of September 2023 we also have 33 children of the 315 in our care in residential placements but at a projected cost of now £9m for the year. Since January 2022, the average costs of the external residential care market have risen significantly, and that trend continues. The average cost of those placements is now £5,238 per week (to social care directly).

The significant increase in residential placement costs is due to a combination of; demand outstripping supply which increase prices in a very competitive market for bed spaces; as well as inflation and wage increases, leading to further increase costs for placement providers. There is also the need and complexity of some of the children and young people, requiring additional support and interventions from the placement. The average cost of a residential placement itself has risen by 36% from 2021/22 to 2023/24 including an 18% increase from 2022/23 to 2023/24. Increased financial pressure has also been due to a reliance on IFAs with 98 children placed with an IFA as of September 2023 at a cost of £5.2M for the year.

We are continually seeking to address and challenge the cost of Residential placements with a monthly High-Cost residential panel chaired by the Executive Director which reviews all the current residential placements. As a result of this panel and the work of the Children's Commissioner and their brokerage team we have avoided circa £950k's worth of costs in this financial year.

An investment in the Council's Fostering Service, agreed by Council in the budget setting for 2023/24 to increase the number of in house Foster carers with an improved inhouse foster care remuneration offer so that we can place more children locally to maintain their links with their family

and friends and avoid changing schools (at an average cost of £26k p.a. per child placed) in order to reduce our reliance on IFAs (average cost of £52k pa per child placed).

In addition, a focus on practice within Children's Services to improve permanence for children and young people we care for, including plans to reunify children home with their parents where it has been deemed safe and appropriate to do so with support packages, are some of the ways we seeking to address cost pressures in the longer term.

Further targeted saving details will also be shared through the Cabinet and Council budget setting papers for 2024/25, early in January 2024.

8. Councillor O'Connor asks a second question of the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cox)

Question

This administration is collectively underspending on SEND provision but is massively overspent on Educational Psychology. What is being done to attract permanent staff to the Educational Psychology roles?

Answer

- The situation regarding the shortage and recruitment of permanent Educational Psychology (EP) staff is a national issue. This, therefore, means that overspending on locum services is also an issue faced by other local authorities.
- What is Southend doing to alleviate this challenge?
- All London courses are making a point of ensuring that trainees who have accessed bursaries funded by local authorities go into LA practice rather than private practice. This was a previous condition but was not enforced.
- Southend are developing links with London and East Anglia EP training courses to raise Southend's profile as a trainee placement. Once trainees are on placement, it is easier to keep them following training.

- The New Principal EP already has firm links with one of the London courses having been a previous Academic Tutor on the course, and supervised a previous trainee in Southend, who then stayed on.
- We are offering a recruitment and retention incentive that is very competitive, and available in two lump sums, after six months and two years to encourage stability. I would suggest that this would be even more attractive if it followed the model of other LAs, such as Hertfordshire, and offered an incentive after this initial two years for every further two years of service. This recruitment and retention package is ahead of other LAs, particularly most of London, and offers competition to the Outer and London Fringe payments due to the Southend's location near London.
- We are offering EP Specialisms, such as emotional wellbeing, and therapeutic work, as part of our developing traded service to encourage those who might not want to go into management to be able to expand their knowledge, skills, and expertise.
- We are looking to become active again on social media, such as Twitter/X, so that the EP world become familiar with Southend as a unique and rewarding place to work. This will require possibly some investment initially to attract the right person to be able to do this and keep on top of it regarding quality and relevant weekly posting.
- The inclusion of early intervention work (trading with schools) as well as EHCP work offers more variety and is attractive to main grade EPs.
- The current division of the traded and legal (EHCP) services is attractive to main grade EPs who have previously worked in LAs where all they do is complete EHCP advice and no preventative work.
- We are expanding our agency connections so that we can reach other EPs wanting to find permanent work in a place like Southend.
- We are ensuring our pay offer is competitive and our staff are looked after in terms of a work allocation model. This will ensure that EPs do

not feel over-worked and continue to enjoy a balance of work that is manageable.

- We are seeking to ensure that policies and procedures are in place for Continued Professional Development (CPD) and supervision so that EPs feel supported in terms of wellbeing.
- We are looking to invest in trainees through contributing to training bursaries for Years 2 and 3 (approx. 19,900 per trainee), as well as inviting Year 1 trainees to complete their short summer placement with us. This is at no cost, other than supervision time.
- We are looking to strengthen our links with other LA services, such as the Southend Virtual School, and Southend Youth Justice Service, to attract main grade EPs to the team with a variety of opportunities.
- We will be developing a specialist wellbeing service which will be attractive to all levels of EP.
- We will be expanding our involvement in training Assistant EPs and participating in the recruitment of trainees for the London and eastern region courses so that we can share what Southend has to offer at a very early stage in someone's EP career.

9. Councillor Sadza asks a question of the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cox)

Question

In a recent financial paper, a discrepancy has been noted between the predicted and actual cost of agency staff in the legal department. What is the cash value of this discrepancy?

Answer

Thank you for your question.

Legal Services has a staffing budget for 2023/24 financial year of £1.14m.

At period 4 (July 2023) the forecast spend on permanent staff was £0.86m and the forecast spend on agency was £0.4m, giving a combined forecast overspend on staffing of £0.12m.

At period 6 (September 2023) the forecast spend on permanent staff was £0.86m and the forecast spend on agency was £0.5m (an increase of £0.1m), giving a combined forecast overspend on staffing of £0.22m.

These predicted costs are forecasts based on the information available at the time, the actual cost of agency staff in Legal Services for the year will not be known until the 2023/24 outturn, which will be reported in June 2024.

10. Councillor Sadza asks a second question of the Cabinet Member for Regulatory Services (Cllr Lamb)

Question

What are the detailed plans for the outsourcing of maintenance and cleaning of the Travel Centre, and in the Forward Plan does the Portfolio Holder envisage changing the Travel Centre in any way?

Answer

The Travel Centre is maintained by the Council's Property and Estate Management team through its various term contractors whilst cleaning is undertaken by South Essex Property Services. There are no plans to change these arrangements. There are no proposals at this time to alter the Travel Centre.

11. Councillor Berry asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Parking (Cllr Buck)

Question

Fewer people are using buses than predicted, leading to a £550,000 underspend in concessionary fares. Does the portfolio holder see this as a positive?

Answer

Nationally, the number of concessionary fare journeys have yet to reach pre-pandemic levels. However, we recognise that bus services are essential for many Southend residents.

Through the Bus Service Improvement Plan and the Enhanced Partnership, we are working with the bus operators to improve existing bus services and cross-city connectivity, and we are discussing with them how we can jointly promote local bus routes and also make the information on them more accessible. We are also evaluating where we can use the limited BSIP+ money, allocated to us by the Department for Transport, to enhance bus provision on certain individual corridors within Southend.

12. Councillor Gilbert asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Economic Growth and Investment (Cllr Nelson)

Question

Can the portfolio-holder say how many people or businesses have taken part in the growth strategy consultation?

Answer

The recent consultation on the Growth Strategy was available on 'Your Say Southend' and hard copies were available for completion at the last Southend Business Partnership Briefing session. 19 people or businesses took part in the consultation through these forums.

The survey link was also shared with Essex Chambers of Commerce for distribution among their members and specifically to the new Strategic Southend Business Partnership Board which they co-ordinate and members were invited to feedback at the inaugural board meeting.

Feedback has also been received from direct engagement with the Southend Business Partnership Executive, which is attended by 22 business, and the Economic Crisis and Recovery Group. In addition to this there have been workshops with a wide range of Council services.

13. Councillor Gilbert asks a second question of the Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Parking (Cllr Buck)

Question

Can the portfolio-holder provide council with an impartial estimate (eg agreed by finance officers) of how much revenue has been forgone by the decision not to charge for parking in seafront car parks between 6pm and 9pm?

Answer

The introduction of the 18:00 to 21:00 parking charges in Zone 1a had been budgeted to increase parking income by £250k PA. Initial income achieved by their introduction from April to July was £170k. However, during the month of July, when the 18:00 to 21:00 parking charges were still in place, parking income dropped significantly over the previous year, when these extra charges were not in place, by £70k. This negative impact is due to visitors becoming accustomed to and realising the financial impact it was having on their individual budgets when visiting Southend. The impact of a reduction of parking revenue in July of £70k in Zone 1a, meant that we needed to act swiftly to stop the downward trajectory of further parking income losses due to this damaging new policy.

When the 18:00 to 21:00 charges were removed, August quickly recovered to about the same income as 2022 and September saw an increase in parking income, without the 18:00 to 21:00 charges in place, of £140k over the previous in year month. The evidence of the negative impact the 18:00 to 21:00 parking charges were having on parking income and the local economy was very evident and the positive impact their removal had, is equally evident. It would have been extremely remiss and foolhardy for this administration to no act swiftly upon the very clear and unambiguous evidence, to stop the harmful effects these charges were having on Southend.

14. Councillor Dent asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Public Health, Adult Social Care and Constitutional affairs (Cllr Moyies)

Question

Can the cabinet member for Health & Adult Social Care confirm whether it is still the intention of the administration to cut the NetPark Wellbeing project?

Answer

I can confirm that there is a proposal to remove the post of the Mental Wellbeing Co-Ordinator from our establishment as part of a wider restructuring of our adults and communities department. The post is linked to the NetPark Wellbeing project but is not the project in itself. We are aware that the role the Co-ordinator has in supporting the delivery of the project and of the impact that our decision to propose the removal of this post could have on NetPark Wellbeing.

We will continue to offer support to the project going forward and we are working with the organisation to seek a solution.

15. Councillor Dent asks a second question of the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning (Cllr Garston)

Question

Can the cabinet member for Housing please tell me how many individuals Southend Council has housed in temporary accommodation in each of the last five years, and the cost to the council in each of the last five years?

Answer

Please note this response excludes spend for the provision of temporary accommodation in the self-contained city centre tower block units.

The costs of guest house provided TA is as follows:

2017/18 - £21,794

2018/19 - £149,881

2019/20 - £432,412

2020/21 - £1,293,708

2021/22 - £352,580

2022/23 - £1,143,585

2023/24 - £557,511 (up to 15/11/23)

Total spend from 2017-15/11/23 is £3,942,439

The spend for hostels is as follows:

2017/18 - £490,451

2018/19 - £411,046

2019/20 - £401,135

2020/21 - £400,050

2021/22 - £474,096

2022/23 - £465,892

Total for period 2017-2023 is £2,642,670

This covers both Rough Sleeping Initiative spend as well as our statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation to homeless households.

In terms of numbers to match the spend, for the Rough Sleeping Initiative the numbers in guest house per financial year were:

2017 / 2018 - 0 – The first year of the Rough Sleeper Grant was 2018/19.

2018 / 2019 - 19

2019 / 2020 - 104

2020 / 2021 - 234

2021 / 2022 - 105

2022 / 2023 - 125

2023 / 2024 - 56 – this is up until 15/11/23

It will need to be noted that these numbers represent the number of individuals who are counted once per financial year. This doesn't consider the length of time each individual was in B&B nor how many times they were placed in accommodation in the same year. The individuals may be the same as those in previous or subsequent financial years or their stay may span across into another year.

It is much more difficult to give a total number in temporary accommodation for our wider homeless households (placed in guest house, hostel and city centre tower blocks) per year as our software does not run specific reports for that and month to month the figure alone would likely contain duplicates. However, looking back at the monthly numbers over the last 7 financial years we can provide average number of households in temporary accommodation per month for that year:

2017 / 2018	-	111
2018 / 2019	-	153
2019 / 2020	-	202
2020 / 2021	-	266
2021 / 2022	-	201
2022 / 2023	-	242
2023 / 2024	-	254 (so far)

16. Councillor Hyde asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Regulatory Services (Cllr Lamb)

Question

The Council has lost £795k in predicted income due to the crematorium refurbishment. How much will this position have recovered by the end of the financial year?

Answer

Thank you for your question. We are currently projecting that the crematorium will have generated approximately £150,000 by the end of the financial year (23/24).

17. Councillor Hyde asks a second question of the Leader of the Council (Cllr Cox)

Question

What risks do we foresee from climate change with regards to flooding and extreme weather, and do we have sufficient protections against these in Southend?

Answer

The data shows that Southend is increasingly likely to experience the impacts of climate change in the years to come, including:

- frequent and more extreme flooding
- faster and more extreme coastal erosion
- more frequent and more extreme droughts leading to water shortages,
- permanent damage to habitats, plants and wildlife

The city's coastal defences provide the appropriate level of protection for current climate impacts, but officers are working hard through a variety of projects and partnerships including Catchment to Coast and Marine Parade Sustainable Water Management Scheme to ensure that the coastal defences will provide sufficient protection for future climate impacts

18. Councillor Line asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Public Health, Adult Social Care and Constitutional Affairs (Cllr Moyies)

Question

Last month, Southend-on-Sea City Council's own public health team made phone calls to every dental practice in Southend. Every single one of them said that they were not open for registration taking on new NHS patients.

There is a devastating shortage of NHS dental provision in our city and this is having a detrimental impact on many residents, especially our vulnerable and Looked After Children, and those subject to child protection plans.

Whilst the Dentaaid bus is doing what it can in order to accommodate some of those children who have had dental emergencies, it is unable to provide regular check-ups. This is resulting in many struggling families being forced to seek costly private care, in the midst of a Cost-of-Living Crisis.

Can I ask what are the immediate and long-term plans to improve access to dental care for the whole population, especially for the most vulnerable in our city?

Answer

For clarity, the dental practice information that was previously shared was from Southend Healthwatch, who reviewed local websites to gather information about NHS dentists, and I can confirm that no phone calls were made to them.

19. Councillor Line asks a question of the Cabinet Member for Arts, Culture, Heritage and Leisure (Cllr Jarvis)

Question

Councillors will be aware of the considerable community campaign to save *The IronWorks*.

In its existence, *The IronWorks* has had a significant impact in the City, welcoming over 100,000 guests and tourists through their doors. It is an exhibition space for live music, theatre, comedy, spoken word poetry, and art and provided opportunities for independent traders to start-up new businesses at relatively low cost, and hosted over 80 weekly clubs, kids' clubs, and community groups.

The IronWorks is an inclusive employer, providing jobs and volunteering opportunities to dozens of individuals, some of whom have additional needs. It's a jewel in the crown of Southend's arts and culture offer.

The Cabinet Member and I have been handed a petition with over 1500 signatures. Considering the Council's plans around regeneration, does the Administration have any intention to provide further support to *The IronWorks* whilst they navigate this particularly precarious next few months?

Answer

You will be aware of the challenging financial difficulties the Council is currently seeking to address. A number of organisations across the City, including Metal, have benefited from Council grants and support over several years. However, the opportunities and their size are reducing against the backdrop of these financial difficulties.

There are, however, a number of long-standing support commitments to various organisations, made previously under a stronger financial position. Budgets and decisions for the 2024/25 financial year have yet to be fully determined.

Officers will be working with Ironworks to provide advice and suggestions about any wider opportunities that Iron works could consider or we could connect them with.