

Policy Panel

Wednesday, 02 August 2023

Attendees: Councillor Kevin Bentley, Councillor Sue Lissimore, Councillor Sam McCarthy, Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell, Councillor Rhys Smithson, Councillor Julie Young
Apologies: Councillor Jocelyn Law
Substitutes: Councillor Fay Smalls (for Councillor Jocelyn Law)

77 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 28 June 2023 be approved as a correct record.

78 Colchester Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy

Karen Syrett, Head of Planning, provided an update on how work on the Strategy was progressing. An in-house approach had been agreed. The Local Plan covered more than just housing and included blue and green infrastructure. A report to the following week's Local Plan Committee meeting would lay out a new approach to consultation and drafting of this strategy. Key themes such as the local green network and waterways were to be investigated, with an audit of blue and green infrastructure being carried out, working with communities and parish/town councils to progress action. The Council sought ways to improve existing spaces and waterways. New housing could facilitate better spaces, green and blue infrastructure, biodiversity and wildlife conditions, working with local people who had local knowledge.

A Panel member raised issues with the grounds maintenance contracts in place for some new housing schemes, with many residents unhappy at the service received. The Head of Planning was asked how the Strategy would cover the right of residents to well-maintained green spaces, and promised to take this issue away for consideration.

A Panel member asked if there was a variable percentage of green infrastructure from ward to ward, and whether a deficit counted towards whether conditions were right for additional housing. The Head of Housing explained that Prettygate Ward had the lowest percentage of open space, and agreed that there were differences between wards. Opportunities were being identified, including where green spaces could be created or improved, plus where housing should be allocated and where to protect land.

The Panel complimented the interactive map available online, but queried how residents would be able to contribute to consultation if they did not wish to, or could not, communicate via online avenues. The Head of Housing gave assurance that the consultations would be open to all, with a range of methods for engagement. The Panel discussed the proposed length of timescales and the Head of Housing underlined that the Local Plan process was a lengthy one, taking time to conduct proper engagement. There would be information available for people from an early

stage.

Rosa Tanfield, Head of Neighbourhood Services, explained that once the guiding principles were developed, this would give consistency in the approach across the Council. It was expected that the draft Strategy would come back to the Policy Panel for further consideration in Winter of the 2024-25 municipal year.

The Panel asked how the Leader of the Council planned to manage long term financial commitments. Councillor King, Leader of the Council, spoke of the serious choices and trade-offs facing the Council, noting that having policy without funding would be pointless. Funding would be found where it could, likely from multiple sources. The County Council and its Leader, Councillor Bentley, were a partner with a visionary approach to tackling climate change and a range of charities were potential partners also. The Leader stated that the challenge was understood, and that work was ongoing to answer it.

The Head of Housing described how the initial Local Plan 'call for sites' had resulted in around 95% of sites identified being for housing. There were now increases in sites identified for increasing biodiversity and blue or green infrastructure. Work on the City Centre Masterplan had sparked responses on issues such as how to use open spaces and waterways. The detail for the Masterplan relating to the green spaces and river on a site by site basis would come later, after proposals had been worked up. Biodiversity studies and ecological assessments would then be carried out on a site-specific basis.

The Panel discussed considerations as to income generation from blue and green assets. Rosa Tanfield, Head of Neighbourhood Services, explained that this had been considered as part of the transformation savings for the Council, with part being to generate income from sites. This was planned for delivery over coming years.

RESOLVED that the Policy Panel notes the report on Colchester Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy.

79 Grounds Maintenance Contract and Transition Update

Councillor Bentley (by reason of being Leader of Essex County Council) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7 (5).

Rosa Tanfield, Head of Neighbourhood Services, explained the background to this item, including the consideration of different studies and options when deciding how to proceed with grounds maintenance in the future. The original idverde contract had an option for an extension of up to three years, if sufficient notice were given by the Council. This dictated the timescales in place for extending the contract and putting in place a new in-house service to follow that extension. An update was given of the work being carried out to migrate to an in-house service, and the increased pressures on the team were highlighted.

Decisions had been taken regarding reduction in grass cutting and verge maintenance, owing to cost pressures, and the work to minimise the use of glyphosate

weedkillers.

A question was asked about the 'Responder' system, as to whether elected members would have a dedicated platform to use, with a Panel member concerned at the current lack of communication between elected members and idverde. The Head of Neighbourhood Services explained that the system was now called 'Tasksmart'. Development of the system had been driven forward, working with the street care and safety teams. Councillors could log issues, generate reference numbers and receive regular updates. Details were then given as to further work to be done, including development of the website. The system was not yet in place but work was pushing forward and details with a timescale would be given as soon as possible. In the meantime, councillors could use the idverde website to see the timetable of cutting and mowing to be done.

The Panel asked whether shared service options were being considered. The Head of Neighbourhood Services related that not many conversations had been held as yet on this, due to the current contract extension for three years, but that it would be a good option to hold these conversations with potential partners. A timetable for looking at shared service options was requested by a Panel member, and the Leader of the Council explained that significant progress had been made, mindful of future devolution and aims to maximise shared services for back office functions. Examples were given, and the Leader of the Council noted that local authorities in North Essex had signed a protocol to commit to this.

A Panel member asked whether there were easier ways for councillors to access the Highway Rangers and to get information on cuttings more easily for residents. The Head of Neighbourhood Services explained that Essex County Council [ECC] had ended their funding for the Highways Rangers and that the service had been withdrawn. The City Council had retained one of the Rangers to work here, but any highways issues now had to be reported to Essex Highways. More information on location of verge cuttings would soon be available for councillors to check.

The Panel discussed concerns raised by Unison, regarding the pay for idverde staff, and asked if the issue had been resolved for the remainder of the contract. Jess Douglas, Head of People, explained that, if the terms and conditions idverde set for their staff were not equal to those of Council staff then, should they transfer to the Council, their terms and conditions would be equalised. It was explained that idverde set their own staff's pay levels, and that Council representatives would soon be meeting again with the company.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services was asked whether the in-house model of provision would be viable, with a Panel member expressing doubt as to whether the Council could fund the required capital spending. The Head of Neighbourhood Services noted that the situation now was different from that in 2022 and would change again over the next three years, so the situation and plans for service provision would need to be examined over time. The idverde contract could not be extended again, but alternative providers could be examined, if necessary. The Panel discussed complaints regarding no-mow May. A Panel member remarked that the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services and Waste had admitted that there had been problems with idverde. The member asked what talks had been held

with idverde and whether it was true that the approach had been changed now, to end the lack of maintenance. Criticism was voiced as to poor communications from idverde to councillors, who needed to know when grass cutting was planned. Detail was requested as to the geographical areas covered by the idverde contract and as to whether there were financial penalties for idverde, should they not deliver on their contractual obligations, and whether the Council enforced these penalties.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services confirmed that, next year, no-mow May would only be observed in conservation areas. This year had seen unexpected levels of growth caused by a cycle of rain and sunshine. The impact of weather had been to make mowing take much longer, with worse-looking results. As the weather improved, idverde had performed better. The company's website gave information as to where they would be working in the Colchester area. The contract with idverde covered all Council and Colchester Borough Homes land, plus certain land owned by ECC and the Head of Neighbourhood Services offered to see if an online map could show the areas involved, and provide a briefing note to Panel members.

The Panel were informed that Council staff met with idverde for weekly work/contract meetings, and that Project Quality Management [PQM] checks and key performance indicators [KPIs] were used to ensure targets were met. Financial penalties would be issued where the contractor failed, and dates set by which remedial actions would need to be in place.

Information was requested regarding weed spraying, by both the Council and County Council, along with the Council's work to remove dead vegetation from the roadside following spraying. The Head of Neighbourhood Services had spoken to ECC officers about this, with ECC spraying priority roads and the Council conducting street sweeping and removal of dead weed mulch. The ECC spraying schedule would be obtained so that road sweeping could occur at the correct time to clear detritus and prevent further weed growth. Spraying would be conducted from September onward. The Council had eradicated use of glyphosate wherever possible, but officers could not confirm what products were used by ECC.

The Panel discussed the weed spraying conducted, with the belief that ECC conducted spot weedkilling, avoiding wildflower verges and not spraying where weeds were not found. Incidents where ECC officers had sprayed and killed plants on private property/in gardens. The Head of Neighbourhood Services agreed to raise these concerns with colleagues at the County Council.

80 Work Programme 2023-24

The Panel noted that two items had not been added to the work programme, as officers had received advice that these were almost wholly dictated by statute or national regulations. These items were the Licensing Food Health and Safety Policy, and the Council's approach towards supporting community bids to purchase community assets which were being put up for sale.

RESOLVED that the Panel approved its work programme for 2023-24.

