

# SCRUTINY PANEL

## 20 July 2021

*Present: -*

Councillor Cory (Chair)  
Councillor Barton, Councillor Whitehead,  
Councillor Willetts, Councillor Wood

*Substitutions: -*

Councillor Fox for Councillor Bourne  
Councillor Tate for Councillor Loveland

*Also present: -*

Councillor Dundas

### **304. Minutes of Previous Meetings**

*RESOLVED* that the minutes of the meetings held on 26 May 2021 and 8 June 2021 be confirmed as correct records.

### **305. Year End April 2020 – March 2021 Report Key Performance Indicators and Other Performance News**

The Panel considered a report providing details of performance against Key Performance Indicators for the 2020-21 municipal year, and highlighting other performance news. Richard Block, Assistant Director, Corporate and Improvement Services, introduced the report.

The Chair explained that the impact of the Covid pandemic meant that this had been a unique year in terms of performance, and the Scrutiny Panel had accepted this when it had considered the report setting the targets. Nevertheless, the report highlighted some excellent levels of performance that had made a real difference to residents and local businesses, such as the support offered to business through the pandemic.

The Panel considered issues around the collection of waste and recycling. It was noted that the amount of waste that was being presented for collection by residents was increasing, and that the amount of residual waste collected per household exceeded the target. It was suggested by a member of the Panel that the Council could best respond to this by increasing collection services, rather than by seeking to educate or penalise residents. The Council would therefore be providing the services that residents wanted.

In discussion, it was suggested that the Council had a duty to lead, rather than just to react, and had to bear in mind the environmental consequences of increased residual waste. Reduction was at the top of the waste hierarchy. Councillors had had the opportunity to visit Neighbourhood Services, where the efficiency of the Council's waste and recycling services had been demonstrated. Encouraging additional residual waste would put an additional strain on the service.

It was suggested that the increase in domestic residual waste may be offset by a reduction in commercial waste, and that issues around waste and recycling, including commercial waste, could be a useful issue to scrutinise. In discussion it was highlighted the Council only collected a small amount of commercial waste. It would be difficult to gather comparable information as many operators worked outside the borough and information on costs and collections would be regarded as commercially confidential by the operators.

The Panel also discussed issues around business rates and it was noted that collection of business rates was significantly below target. Panel members explored whether non payments were likely to be recovered. It was highlighted that a recovery plan would be implemented during 2021/22. The need to recover payments needed to be balanced against the impact on businesses that were just recovering. The Panel would be able to monitor performance when it reviewed the mid-year figures.

The Panel acknowledged the very difficult circumstances the Council had been operating in since the start of the pandemic and considered that the report demonstrated that the Council had performed well in a number of areas. The Panel was satisfied with the Council's performance at this point and expressed its thanks to the Council's staff.

*RESOLVED* that:-

- (a) The Council's performance against the KPIs for the period 2020-21 be noted.
- (b) The Panel considered that the report demonstrated that the Council had performed well in a number of areas, especially given the challenging circumstances of the pandemic.
- (c) The Panel's thanks to the Council's staff be formally recorded.

### **306. Year End April 2020 – March 2021 Report; 2020-23 Strategic Plan Action Plan**

The Panel considered a report providing details of progress in delivering against the Council's Strategic Plan for 2020-2023 at the end of 2020-2021. Richard Block, Assistant Director, Corporate and Improvement Services, introduced the report and emphasised that the report demonstrated an incredible amount of progress and delivery against all strategic plan priorities. There was considerable evidence of recovery from the Covid 19 pandemic. It was emphasised that the Action Plan reported on the priorities for the last municipal year, and priorities for the current year were dealt with elsewhere on the agenda.

A member of the Panel sought clarification on the breakdown of the figures for affordable homes delivered by the Council in 2020-21.

In discussion, a member of the Panel queried how far the Climate Emergency declaration was embedded in the Strategic Plan and Action Plan, citing that when he

had tried to call in a Portfolio Holder decision on the purchase of caged tipper vehicles on the grounds that the vehicles being purchased were not sustainable electric vehicles, he had been advised that the decision was not contrary to the Strategic Plan Action Plan.

In response it was stressed that “Tackling the Climate Challenge and Leading Sustainability” was the first priority in the Strategic Plan and the report provided considerable detail of achievements which addressed that priority. In addition, there had been a number of factors that had influenced the decision on the purchase of the tipper vehicles, including that the purchase of electric vehicles would have required a significant capital investment in the depot at Shrub End, and there had been a long term commitment to the purchase of electric vehicles.

The Panel emphasised the importance of pressing ahead with projects supporting this priority, such as wilding, and delivering new initiatives such as the collection of film and plastics as recyclable material. The Panel considered that there was a need to focus in particular on the communication with residents on these issues. For example, some residents were unhappy with the policies on wilding and unmown areas and there was a need for clear communications to explain these policies so residents understood the reasons behind them. This should lead to increased buy in and support for such policies.

It was suggested that in line with the priority of Creating Safe Healthy and Active Communities, there would be merit in the Panel exploring the Council’s policies and procedures on allotments as there seemed to be confusion as to the number of plots that were free. Allotments had proved to be a particularly valuable resource for residents during lockdown. It was agreed that the that the Portfolio Holder should be invited to provide a response to the Panel on how the current allotment provision and policies aligned with Strategic Plan objectives of wellbeing. If the Panel had further queries, it could consider adding the issue to its work programme.

*RESOLVED that:---*

(a) The progress in delivering against the Council Strategic Plan at the end of 2020-21 be noted.

(b) The Portfolio Holder for Communities be invited to provide information to the Panel on how the current allotment provision and policies aligned with Strategic Plan objectives of wellbeing.

*RECOMMENDED to CABINET* that it raise the profile of communications on environmental and sustainability issues.

### **307. Budget Strategy 2022/23 and Transformation**

The Panel considered a report on the Budget Strategy 2022/23 and the Transformation programme, which had been submitted to Cabinet on 7 July 2021. Paul Cook, Head of Finance, introduced the report.

The Panel indicated that it would like to pre-scrutinise budget reports in future and requested that the timetable of meetings be reviewed to ensure that there was a Scrutiny meeting preceding Cabinet meeting, to facilitate pre scrutiny.

A member of the Panel sought clarification on when the Strategic Plan would be updated to reflect the priorities set out in the report. It was important that if residents looked at the Strategic Plan it contained the up to date position. Confirmation was also sought on the timetable for budget workshops. Councillor Dundas, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy indicated that the dates for the budget workshops were likely to start in September and would be confirmed shortly. The position on the budget was likely to be clearer then as the scale of recovery of the Council's commercial incomes would be clearer.

The report set out some detail on the administration's aims. Further detail would follow but the administration was looking to build some consensus on some of the issues and to consult with other groups, particularly around priorities on the Youth Zone, affordable housing and car parking. The driving force behind the administration's priorities was to get the borough up and running again and provide support for business, both large and small, and communities across the borough.

Members of the Panel welcomed the reinstatement of locality budgets. It was noted that this was funded from the New Home Bonus and clarification was sought as to whether this would continue to be funded in this way. Councillor Dundas explained that locality budgets spread income and investment evenly throughout the borough. It was a priority to retain locality budgets.

Clarification was sought around the funding for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. A number of ideas for how this could be marked had been floated during the Council meeting on 14 July. Given that £50,000 had been allocated towards supporting the bid for City Status, how much had been allocated for the Platinum Jubilee celebrations? Councillor Dundas indicated that £125,000 had been allocated for Jubilee signage and interpretation, which would form part of the funding. The Policy Panel had been asked to look at potential ideas as how this could be celebrated.

*RESOLVED* that the progress to date on the 2022/23 Budget and Medium Term Financial Forecast be noted.

### **308. Annual Scrutiny Report**

The Panel considered a report setting out a review of the work of the Panel in 2020-21, for submission to Full Council. Richard Block, Assistant Director for Corporate and Improvement Services, introduced the report. The Panel had had a very busy year focusing on the response to Covid and the subsequent recovery. There had been a notable increase in the number of recommendations made to Cabinet.

The Panel commended the report, which it considered was very well written. The Panel thanked the previous Chair and members of the Panel, and the officers who supported the Panel for their respective contributions.

*RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL* that the Annual Scrutiny report 2020-21 be approved.

### **309. Work Programme**

The Panel received a report setting out the Work Programme for the 2021-22 municipal year.

The Chair explained that the meeting of 17 August 2021 currently had no substantive business listed. It had been suggested at the meeting of Chair and Group Spokes that an item on the Town Deal was a possible item of business for this meeting. He suggested that the Panel could look at the following issues in respect of the Town Deal:-

- Programme delivery and the responsibilities of Colchester Borough Council, timescales and resource impacts.
- Measuring the positive or negative impacts of delivering the Youth Zone project and the provision made for youth within the project.

In discussion the Committee indicated its broad support for the proposal that the Town Deal be scrutinised. It was suggested that there was not a detailed understanding across the Council of the Town Deal and the structures surrounding it, nor of the process by which the funding allocated to Colchester had been agreed by Government. It would also be useful to gain greater clarity over how the project interlinked with other Council projects and initiatives. It was suggested that there had been a lack of transparency over the way the Town Deal had been established and in how the projects had been assessed and that this had contributed to the lack of clarity. The Panel considered that this was a project that fell within their terms of reference.

Similarly on the Youth Zone it considered that there was a need for greater clarity and understanding on the project, its costs, the sources of funding and the potential benefits that could arise, so that it could make recommendations to Cabinet.

Richard Block, Assistant Director for Corporate and Improvement Services, stressed that the Council was at a very early stage in its role in the Town Deal. Business cases on the first phase of projects were at an early stage and so at this stage an exploratory overview as was being suggested by the Panel was appropriate. In response the Chair acknowledged that what was being proposed was high level, rather than examining the details of specific projects.

It was also suggested that it would be useful for some members of the Town Deal Board, including the Chair, to be invited to attend the meeting. In particular it would be useful to hear from representatives of Essex County Council who could address issues around youth provision. It was appreciated that in view of the short notice and the time of year it could be difficult to secure this.

*RESOLVED* that:-

- (a) The Work Programme for 2021-22 be approved;
- (b) An additional item on the Town Deal be added to the meeting on 17 August 2021. This item to be high level, strategic scrutiny focusing on:
  - Programme delivery and structure of the Town Deal including the role and responsibilities of Colchester Borough Council, and also looking at timescales and resource impacts.
  - The provision made for youth within the Town Deal project.