

Policy Panel

Wednesday, 03 August 2022

Attendees:
Apologies:
Substitutes:

50 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Owen Howell, Democratic Services Officer, noted that the minutes as produced did not include a record of the approval of minutes from 2 March 2022 and 25 May 2022. A new minute 47 was proposed to cover this.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 June 2022 be confirmed as a correct record, subject to addition of content to reflect the approval of minutes of meetings on 2 March 2022 and 25 May 2022.

51 City Status - Meaning and Opportunities

Andrew Weavers, Monitoring Officer, gave the background to city status being awarded as part of the Platinum Jubilee, with letters patent being prepared to confirm this and due to be received at a special Full Council meeting on 12 September. The letters would be received, and the name of the Council would then be changed to 'Colchester City Council'. All rights and privileges of the Borough Council would be preserved and transferred to the new City Council, which would encompass the same geographical area as the Borough. The first Alderman of the new City Council, former-councillor Peter Chillingworth, would then be appointed and a civic reception held to thank partners who helped in the bid for city status. A Royal visit was likely to occur in the Spring, and the Council was liaising with the Lord Lieutenant's office.

A working group had been formed across all services to maximise the benefits and community involvement in and from city status.

Karen Turnbull gave a presentation laying out the bid which Colchester had submitted to apply for city status, the main areas of opportunity which were being explored, partnership working locally and to learn from the experiences of other cities which had recently gained city status, and the work being done by officers.

Councillor Doctor Pam Cox, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage, presented the Administration's theme for developing Colchester, 'Our City Through Time'. This involved making the most of local historic assets, celebrating the area's different eras by holding themed events, and looking to the future, to include the 'Colchester Future Generations Commission.' An example of the events being explored was to hold a full civil war battle reconstruction to mark the Siege of Colchester, potentially involving the Business Improvement District and likely to cost around £15,000.

In addition to exploiting the cultural and historical assets of Colchester, plans for improving 'green' and 'blue' infrastructure were outlined, including opening up the River Colne to greater recreational use and making Colchester a greener place to live whilst supporting new energy provision options, agri-tech innovation and new technology, including in building new green housing. The Future Generations Commission would work to involve young people in questioning what made a good, commercially successful green city.

Badging/branding would be needed for the new city and the Council was looking to work with the other Essex cities, to promote each other jointly. Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage expressed a preference for keeping the Centurion logo and argued that a logo change should not be rushed. Councillor David King, Leader of the Council, stressed the need to engage all generations and ensure that the project must be fun for all. The current situation facing people was tough, but the gaining of city status would be used to provide positivity and healing, following the pandemic. It was also proposed that the opportunity be taken to generate income and local prosperity in order to improve quality of life and wellbeing. The Leader asked for councillors to help in this and to give their thoughts on how best to achieve the Council's aims. A Panel member noted that Colchester was given Borough status by Richard III and that the new city should remember and acknowledge its history.

The Panel discussed the content of the presentations given and were in agreement that the start of the celebrations should be set as 12 September, on the day that the letters patent would be formally received by the Council. It was stressed that all areas and communities should be involved, including those who found it difficult to come into the centre of Colchester. A request was made for the next Policy Panel meeting to invite residents to give their ideas, including specifically those relating to city status. One Panel member suggested that the letters patent be taken around the Colchester area for display to different communities and it was stressed that the officer working group's work would be directed by elected councillors. The Panel's members suggested opening up the proceedings to be held on 12 September, possibly to hold a large event in the High Street, including a procession with escort, music performances, street partying and performance art. The Portfolio Holder suggested that options could include a street party, with displays and performances on the High Street.

The need for good communications and advertising was discussed, including reaching and consulting with people across the Colchester area, parish councils and rural communities. The Monitoring Officer, in answer to questions, explained that Party Group Leaders had been consulted on a new name, with a consensus reached on 'Colchester City Council'. The issuing of letters patent would cost the Council £1,764, and these would be precious documents. The Council may potentially commission a replica for display purposes, and possibly copies for sale. The Panel was assured that only Colchester would be receiving its letters patent on 12 September, ensuring maximum publicity. A Panel member suggested that the extraordinary Council Meeting should be held away from the Council chamber, at a location that would allow more residents to attend. A concern was raised by one member that 12 September would not leave enough planning time for a large-scale event, and that an enlarged Christmas fair and celebration may be a better option. Renaming and rebranding needs were discussed and Councillor Bentley explained that any replacement of

existing brown signs with new versions would need to be requested from Essex Highways, by 'Visit Essex'.

Panel members urged for people to be encouraged to take part in celebrations on 12 September, noted the entrepreneurial talent across the Borough and considered how to mobilise this talent and to use it to attract business and investment in the future. A suggestion was to consider a City economic improvement zone, especially given the proximity to London.

It was further considered how to include residents from across the Borough, including those who would find it difficult to get to Colchester itself. Members suggested that local celebrations should be considered, and that parish, town and school councils should be asked to be involved in planning festivities.

It was suggested by a Panel member that this would give an opportunity to look for new opportunities to twin Colchester with towns and cities in continental Europe. It was noted that existing twinning relationships should continue to be strengthened.

The potential for celebrating the history of the Colchester area was discussed, including the Gosbecks Archaeological Park and Mersea Island. Caution was urged that the Council must be mindful of budgetary implications of any plans.

Policy Panel asked for further details regarding the officer working group, including how it was being set up and how it would seek input from partner organisations and residents. The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage gave assurance that she would be involved in this working group and that there would be further work done to ascertain how elected members and others would be involved. The Leader of the Council explained that the Council would seek as many ideas as possible, and would aim to gain cross-party support, assigning reasonable resources to any work and looking to invest in ways to improve quality of life and achieve lasting benefits for residents in both urban and rural areas.

The Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage informed the Panel that a range of options to celebrate city status were under consideration. The Leader of the Council expressed a wish to improve opportunities for local performers and artists and explained that the Business Improvement District would look at adapting its planned marketing, with the potential for a 'festival of light' to be held to celebrate Colchester.

A Panel member suggested asking all elected members to nominate their local community assets. The Leader of the Council requested that Cabinet be given time to take on the points raised at this meeting, look at what could be done and then report back to 'share, show and tell.' Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), suggested that an update be provided to Policy Panel later in the municipal year. The Leader of the Council agreed and offered to provide an update at each Panel meeting for the rest of the year. A member of the Panel welcomed this and requested an expanded plan of action be provided to the Panel, with opportunities at future meetings to look at how progress was being made.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that Cabinet considers the comments and ideas put forward by the Policy Panel regarding the celebration of city status, and that

celebrations formally commence on 12 September 2022.

52 New Voter ID Requirements

Andrew Weavers, Monitoring Officer, introduced the subject, explaining that the Elections Act 2022 laid out requirements relating to the showing of photographic ID by electors wishing to vote at polling stations. A 2014 report on election fraud by the Electoral Commission had reported that no problems had been identified, but that a potential risk of personation had been raised. A report on election fraud, produced by Lord Pickles in 2016, had noted that allegations and prosecutions for personation were rare but that there was the potential for personation offences to occur. In 2018 and 2019 the Government had run pilot trials for the use of photo ID by electors, assessing that the results were positive and that it should be made mandatory for voters to show photo ID before being issued with a ballot paper.

The Monitoring Officer gave relevant statistics. In elections held in 2020 and, there had been no cases of personation/voter fraud. In 2019, which included the last general election, there had been six cases of personation recorded, with a total number of votes cast in the general election being around 32million.

The Elections Act 2022 had gained Royal Assent on 28 April 2022, directing requirements for photo ID to be introduced in April 2023, from which point all electors would need to produce an approved form of photo ID when voting at a polling station. Residents without an approved form of photo ID would be able to apply for free ID from the Electoral Registration Officer. It had been expected that the system for applications would go live in January 2023, however the secondary legislation/ regulations, needed in order to provide details of how the system would work, had yet to be approved.

It was thought that there were at least 2,780 electors in Colchester without photo ID. Approved forms of ID included passports, driving licences and the identity documents issued by the Electoral Registration Officer. The plan would be for people to be able to apply for ID up to 5pm on the day before polling day. This would be extremely challenging for the elections team.

If the presiding officer at a polling station had reason to believe that an ID document was not valid for the person producing it, then a ballot paper could not be issued. Such instances would then be recorded. Voters in such a situation could try again with alternative ID, if they wished to do so.

There was as yet no detail available as to how the system of providing free ID documents would work. What was known was that applications would need to be made online and that the ID documentation would likely need to then be posted to applicants. Regulations would be needed to cover the timing of applications, content and information in the ID documentation, the form taken by the ID, security markings, expiry date etc. It was possible that the imposition of photo ID requirements would need to be delayed if the Government did not produce the necessary secondary legislation. Timescales were short for this to happen with enough time for local authorities to work out the details as to how to implement what was required of them.

A Panel member raised concern over the Elections Act 2022 and their view that this was a disproportionate measure to address a very small issue. The member compared the requirement of photo IDs to be shown by electors to historic attempts in the United States to carry out disenfranchisement of parts of the electorate, such as the 'Jim Crow laws'. A further argument was given that in elections across the globe where widespread electoral fraud was alleged, the alleged fraud did not relate to the specific offence of personation. The member expressed a concern that the requirement for voters to show photo ID would disproportionately disenfranchise voters from ethnic minorities who might be less likely to have photo ID. A further concern was raised as to how the Council would be able to prove the identity of people applying for the free photo ID from electoral registration officers, that would need to be provided by local authorities, and the Panel member urged the Council to highlight any problems with the plans as they currently stood.

Another member of the Panel disagreed and stated that local authorities had to get on with carrying out preparations for the system to go live, with numbers of allegations of personation offences from past years being 266 in 2018, 315 in 2020, and 525 in 2019. The Panel member claimed that voters, election agents and candidates had been convicted of electoral fraud over past years. The Monitoring Officer acknowledged that the figures given for allegations were correct and, in response to a question regarding personation/electoral fraud in Colchester Borough, informed the Panel that there had been no allegations or convictions for such offences in the past decade.

The Panel noted that other countries have functioning requirements for photo ID to be shown when voting. The Monitoring Officer clarified that the concern being highlighted by officers was that the Council did not currently have the necessary details from Government as to how the new requirements would need to be implemented, and that the longer it took for the details to be laid out, the more difficult it would be for local authorities to put in place the necessary measures to carry out their duties to provide photo ID in advance, and to check ID at polling stations. It was vital that detail be provided as to how electors would access the scheme for providing free photo ID for electoral purposes.

The Panel asked questions regarding the pilot schemes where photo ID requirements had been trialled, including a pilot in Braintree. The Monitoring Officer explained that the Braintree pilot had been a 'mixed ID' model, including the showing of photo ID and/or proof of name and address. The Electoral Commission statistics showed that 203 people had been refused a ballot, with 73 of those returning with an accepted photo ID. Around 0.3% of electors who presented themselves at a polling station had been denied a vote due to lack of identification documentation.

The Panel discussed the distinctions between voter ID requirements and ID card schemes. Different views were exchanged regarding voter ID and ID cards, with several Panel members arguing that the real concern was the short time scale involved and the pressure on the elections team to be able to be prepared for the new requirements, with one Panel member suggesting that this scheme could be being implemented prematurely, potentially to trial it before it would have to be used in a general election.

Questions were asked as to what changes would apply to postal and proxy voting, whether there would be government funding to cover the cost of the new requirements on the Council and whether necessary resources, including more staff at polling stations, would be in place. A Panel member argued that the Council should lobby for a change in deadline for voter ID applications, giving the view that 5pm on the day before polling day would be unworkable. The Monitoring Officer explained that the ID requirements did not affect postal voters, but that postal voters would now need to reapply for postal voting every three years, rather than every five years, and that proof of ID would be required when applying/reapplying. The deadline for submitting applications for free photo ID was laid down in the Elections Act and would require statutory amendment if it were to be changed.

Concerns were raised by a Panel member that the lack of time for implementing the new requirements would limit how these could be advertised and risked disenfranchising residents who may not hear about them. Worries were also voiced regarding the potential digital exclusion of electors, if the scheme for issuing electoral photo ID relied upon an online application system, and the financial exclusion of electors who may not be able to afford to have photos of the requisite quality taken [such as in photo booths]. The Monitoring Officer gave assurance that a communications strategy was being developed to publicise the voter ID requirements well in advance of the 2023 elections, but that this could not commence until Government provided specific details of the requirements laid out in the Elections Act. It was currently expected that the only way to apply for election photo ID would be online via the central government portal, which could cause issues as it was not currently linked to any council systems.

Polling station staffing and resource implications were under consideration. This would include the need to provide private spaces for electors who wished to show their ID in private. It was confirmed to the Panel that any Police presence at polling stations would not entail any financial ramifications for local authorities. Discussions would continue with the Chief Executive of the Council to ensure any necessary increase in resources would be affected.

The Panel agreed that it should receive updates on this subject as the situation progressed, which could be considered under the Work Programme item.

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Work Programme 2022-23

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), informed the Panel that the Leader of the Council and Cabinet had already encouraged public engagement and were keen to promote the Panel's work and encouraged people to raise ideas. The Strategic Plan was due to end in 2023 so there was work to be done to create a new Plan, with Policy Panel having a role to help shape the new Plan. It was suggested that the Panel might want to look at new ways to conduct engagement and noted that there would be other paths for engagement, and that items on the Work Programme could also attract resident views and engagements.

A Panel member suggested that an update item on city status should be added to the

agenda for each meeting. It was also suggested that a more detailed item should come to the Panel regarding voter ID requirements, in November if possible, or January if the necessary detail is released later in the year by government.

The possibility of holding Panel meetings in locations across Colchester was discussed, with the limitations and challenges that this would bring regarding accessibility, broadcast, and the need to provide induction loops for people with aural conditions. It was argued that meeting in different locations would potentially help with engagement, including with newcomers to the Borough. A Panel member advocated giving as much notice as possible to members of the public, to give more opportunity for members of the public to prepare and order their presentations and suggestions. Differing views were expressed as to the usefulness of a 'roadshow' approach to Panel meeting locations, with some arguing that it was better to use the Town Hall as the central location and fine-tune the meeting process to see how this could be improved.

The Leader of the Council agreed with the Panel that it would make sense to seek ideas relating to the Council's strategic priorities, and look to do this in a specific agenda item for this purpose, which would be less restrictive than the formal 'Have Your Say' item on each meeting agenda. The Leader offered to work with members to find ways to collect, exchange and discuss ideas more informally.

Officers were asked if there could be a way for people to drop in/submit suggestions to the Council, and with a way to direct that suggestions should focus on the Council's priorities. Officers were also asked to explore ways in which information and opinions from Parish, Town and Community Councils could be gathered and captured. It was noted that CALC [Colchester Association of Local Councils] could be contacted to see if it could assist in seeking views from the local councils which it represented.

Regarding the expected report on Cost of Living Crisis/Financial Inequality, due to come to the Panel on 21 September 2022, a Panel member emphasised the need to dig into detail and hear about effects and mitigations across all demographics, arguing that the Panel should ask people to give their views and experiences relating to this specific subject.

RESOLVED that the POLICY PANEL directs officers to consider ways for the Panel to engage more with residents, craft a proposal reflecting the content and spirit of this meeting's discussions, and submit this to the Panel for consideration.