

Policy Panel

Wednesday, 04 August 2021

Attendees: Councillor Peter Chillingworth, Councillor Mark Goacher, Councillor Chris Hayter, Councillor John Jowers, Councillor Martin Leatherdale, Councillor Sam McCarthy, Councillor Chris Pearson, Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell
Apologies: Councillor Pam Cox
Substitutes: Councillor Adam Fox (for Councillor Pam Cox)

21 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

22 Update on Covid 19 Commemorations

Hayley McGrath, Corporate Governance Manager, introduced her report outlining possible options for ideas to commemorate those lost to Covid-19 and remember the work and service given by people across our communities during the pandemic.

The Panel were informed that no decisions had yet been made on what would happen, and that those bereaved had not yet been able to come together in communities to memorialise those who had been lost and to gain closure. An approach had been made by Sir Bob Russell, High Steward of Colchester, and Hunnaballs Family Funeral Group, who wished to organise an event, half as sombre memorial and half as an event to look to the future. It was felt that the Council might want to support such work, helping communities to hold memorial events across the Borough in local halls, churches or in private venues.

It was noted that the Crematorium was planning an intimate service for the bereaved and that more information would be provided to elected members when details are confirmed. The Mayor had expressed a wish to hold an event to thank NHS and other keyworkers, whilst the Police Borough Commander had likewise expressed his wish to hold an event, including an opportunity for officers to meet and greet members of the public.

In addition, the Panel were asked to consider their thoughts as to options for a permanent memorial, and whether the Council should lead work on this, or provide support to other organisations, partners and communities. A uniform approach across the Borough might be desirable. Memorial tree planting was given as a potential idea for communities across the Borough, although Panel noted that care would be needed to make sure this was kept separate from any Jubilee tree plantings and ceremonies.

Timings for potential memorial events had not yet been set, and to an extent would depend upon any pandemic developments in coming months. It was felt likely that there might be a national memorial event on 23 March 2022.

An initial budget of £10k for memorial/commemorative events had been found from the civic budget and other funding options would need to be found in order to add to this, potentially including community funding. The Panel were informed that it was not felt appropriate for the Council to lead on all events, but it was considered appropriate for the Council to support partners in running events. The Panel was asked to consider whether to recommend the setting-up of a small working group with other organisations and community representatives to discuss and lay out plans.

The Corporate Governance Manager outlined some of the potential venues/locations for events, including Castle Park, Northern Gateway and the Town Centre. The Civic Office would support a festival event in Charter Hall.

In discussing the options presented, a Panel member expressed dissatisfaction with the budget allocated to this work. The importance of providing communities with local spaces for quiet reflection and memorials. Cabinet had expressed support for this view and officers were asked to make sure that this was reflected in any plans laid out. The Corporate Governance Manager explained that the £10k initial budget was a carry-over from the past year's civic budget and was not intended to be the full budget for this work. Part of the planning process would be to find additional sources of funding. Officers would then provide costings for requests/ideas and then bring these to the Panel for consideration, with the Panel's recommendations then going forward to Cabinet so as to inform Cabinet's decision-making processes.

Support was voiced for the ideas put forward by the High Steward and Hunnaballs, and for the need to do something to commemorate the service of NHS and keyworkers during the pandemic, whilst ensuring that memorials and memorial events are open for all to participate. The Panel discussed options for memorial events, with members' opinions given including that a memorial event in an open central location with good transport links would be best, accompanied by memorial events and sites in each Council ward. Wards, working with their councillors, could lay out their own memorials and events, and a Panel member suggested that the Panel could recommend that Cabinet grant funding to each ward to facilitate this.

The potential for commemorative/memorial tree plantings was discussed. Caution was advised, as some would need to be replaced over time, and memorial plaques could be lost or taken from such plantings. However, a view was also given that trees, as living memorials, would be a fitting memorial option, and could be replaced/replanted in the future if necessary.

The Panel discussed the expertise and experience that many Parish Councils had in organising local events, and agreed that it would be wise for the Council to see what other organisations and councils were planning. A suggestion was made that a sensory garden could be installed in the grounds of Holy Trinity Church, Colchester, or a fountain in the St Nicholas Square area. A further suggestion was to plant trees along Colchester High Street.

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), welcomed support for tree plantings and explained that there was already funding available for this within the woodland and biodiversity budget for planting. Blossoming trees were being considered,

especially for their symbolic value, and would be discussed by the planned working group. The Assistant Director agreed that any plans should be community-led and include local groups and volunteer organisations.

A Panel member expressed agreement that it was too early to set dates at this point, then asking as to whether there might be a national lead taken on this to advise as to scheduling of memorial events. The importance of consulting the public was also stressed, potentially giving a range of options on types of events, memorials and timings, so as to gauge levels of support. The Corporate Governance Manager agreed that consultation should be carried out to gain public views, whilst setting some parameters to ensure that all suggestions are within what the Council could do. She committed to bringing to the Panel's next meeting a summary of the ideas given tonight, with ways to carry out consultation and public engagement. Costings would then be drawn up and brought to the Panel.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that: -

- (a) The idea of a remembrance festival, that can be replicated across the Borough, is developed, with a programme for the event and how that can be shared with the community;
- (b) A community celebration event is arranged, working with other agencies such as the emergency services;
- (c) A design for a memorial bench and wording for the plaque is drawn up;
- (d) The Assistant Director Environment and the Corporate Governance Manager set up a small working group of relevant officers and representatives of other organisations, such as One Colchester and the BID, to ensure that covid commemorative activities are co-ordinated throughout the Borough and not all actions remain the responsibility of the Council.

RESOLVED that an update report be submitted to the Panel at its meeting on 22 September 2021, summarising the ideas raised by the Panel at its meeting on 4 August 2021 and including ways to consult and collect public opinions and ideas and, if possible, information on costings of different options.

23 Policy Panel Work Programme

The Panel considered a report on its work programme for 2021-22.

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), introduced a number of extra items for potential recommendation to Cabinet for adding to the Panel's Work Programme. These included scheduling scrutiny of the business case and model for the new grounds maintenance contract, consideration of Jubilee events for 2022, a review of a range of neighbourhood policies and a session on River Colne Strategy development, with input from the Environment and Sustainability Panel.

The Panel discussed the items suggested, along with those already on the Work Programme. Officers were asked to give a general idea of the budget and timescales

for items such as Jubilee celebrations and the River Strategy, to give an idea of the scope for these items.

Concern was expressed that the work on Covid-19 memorials and events had little-to-no policy ramifications, with the same being true for Jubilee planning.

The River Strategy was considered, and a Panel member emphasised the importance of this, and of ensuring that the Panel avoid being moved away from considering issues and items of importance to the Borough. Cabinet could always refuse giving the Panel permission to look at issues, but there should be justification given for any refusals. Panel members underlined that the Panel should not accept being diverted away from considering serious matters without a justifiable reason.

A suggestion was made that the Panel should recommend it be given leave to investigate ways to better attune the Council's planning policies to reflect the Climate Change Emergency which it had declared. The member suggesting this gave the view that this would be an appropriate subject for the Panel to examine and that the constitution did not state that consideration of planning policies was only within the remit of the Local Plan Committee.

A further item for consideration was raised. A Panel member requested that the Panel recommend it be given leave to look at the likely effects of the expected ending of the £20 uplift in Universal Credit and ways in which the Council could work with partners to mitigate negative effects experienced by residents. This could be widened to look at ways in which the Council could work to mitigate financial inequalities within the Borough, including those caused or exacerbated by the pandemic and lockdowns, and could take information from Council officers, Colchester Borough Homes, Citizens' Advice, Foodbanks and other partners.

Caution was advised by one Panel member who advised that nationally determined policy decisions and issues, which could not be affected by the Council, were not within the Panel's remit. It was stressed that the Panel should ensure that it focuses on local impacts and potential mitigations of problems and other things over which the Council has some control or influence. An example was that much planning policy was set nationally, such as through the National Planning Policy Framework, and that officers would be better placed to advise on national restrictions on local planning policies. Several Panel members asked whether it would not be more appropriate for the Environment and Sustainability Panel to examine the environmental implications of the Council's planning policies. There was a discussion of this, with a suggestion made that officers liaise with the Environment and Sustainability Panel to ascertain what work it had done in this area, and the potential scope for Policy Panel to take this work further.

The Panel raised concern that it had lost its 'public initiatives' element and the ability to be a forum for ideas from the public, becoming a more insular panel in the process. It was highlighted that the public could still bring forward ideas at Policy Panel meetings and officers were asked to find ways to publicly promote what is coming to the Panel and highlight ways in which the public can have their say and bring ideas to the Panel.

The Panel discussed how best to schedule the items being requested, in regard to officer time needed to produce reports and potentially invite representatives from partner organisations.

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), agreed to liaise with the Chairman and Group Spokespeople regarding the recommendations to be made by the Panel to Cabinet.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that the Policy Panel be given approval to add the following items to its work programme: -

- (a) A review of planning policies as to how and if existing planning policies are suitably guiding development toward sustainable solutions, given the Council's climate emergency declaration;
- (b) Consideration of the implications associated with the end of the £20 uplift to Universal Credit, and what local support the Council can potentially give to those on low incomes and to address financial inequality within the Borough;
- (c) Review of, and recommendations relating to, proposed Neighbourhood Services Policies (Litter Strategy, Litter Bin Policy, Graffiti Policy, Drone Policy);
- (d) River Strategy Development.

RESOLVED that the Policy Panel have agreed to the following scheduling of items for its work programme: -

- (a) An update report on Covid memorial options, including ways to consult and collect public opinions and ideas and, if possible, information on costings of different options;
- (b) A review of planning policies as to how and if existing planning policies are suitably guiding development toward sustainable solutions, given the Council's climate emergency declaration [subject to Cabinet approval of this item] on 22 September 2021;
- (e) Consideration of the implications associated with the end of the £20 uplift to Universal Credit, and what local support the Council can potentially give to those on low incomes and to address financial inequality within the Borough [subject to Cabinet approval of this item] on 24 November 2021;
- (c) Review & recommendations relating to proposed Neighbourhood Services Policies (Litter Strategy, Litter Bin Policy, Graffiti Policy, Drone Policy) [subject to Cabinet approval of this item] on 24 November 2021;
- (d) Queens Jubilee celebrations on 12 January 2022;
- (e) River Strategy development on 2 March 2022.

