

## **POLICY PANEL**

### **30 November 2022**

**Attendees:** Councillors Scott-Boutell [Chairman], Bentley, Jowers, Law and Pearson.

**Substitutes:** Councillor Smith for Councillor Coleman, Councillor Naylor for Councillor Smithson.

#### **58. Minutes of Previous Meeting**

*RESOLVED* that the minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2022 be confirmed as a correct record.

#### **59. Have your say on the future of Colchester**

Mr Chilvers attended and addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) to highlight a number of concerns which he had wanted to raise at an earlier focus group meeting which had been cancelled. The Panel were asked whether the Council's leisure facilities had to be so concentrated at the Leisure World site, referencing fitness and sports options possible elsewhere in the area. Mr Chilvers then asked for a wider roll-out of wheelie bins, to areas which did not currently have them, citing changing demographics as an argument in favour of this. Regarding the night-time economy, Mr Chilvers recommended a review to gather information if the Council wished to encourage more city-centre residential properties. Problems within the city were given as including bad driving, traffic congestion, fear of crime and antisocial behaviour and the harm these problems did to the image of the city and to its businesses. Mr Chilvers advocated greater policing and enforcement to solve issues and encourage more people to live in the city centre. Moving on to GP services, Mr Chilvers posited that the Council needed to factor in the need for increases to GP provision for residents in the city centre, along with other professional services and street cleansing resources. Finally, Mr Chilvers cautioned that the use of online-only surveys might skew the data received unless the demography of the respondents was very similar to that of the city's residents in general.

A statement was read on behalf of Mrs Williams (who was unable to attend the meeting), pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1). Mrs Williams raised concern about abandoned vehicles and asked if such vehicles could be removed more quickly, and broken up and recyclable parts recycled. Mrs Williams also urged the Council to collect household recycling materials in one single collection, rather than collecting different materials separately. Finally, Mrs Williams argued in favour of free parking options for shoppers, noting the cost of existing car parks in Colchester, compared to free parking in retail developments such as Lakeside.

Rosa Chandler, Group Manager – Neighbourhood Services, informed the Panel that

she would contact Mrs Williams to get details of the issues raised.

Rory Doyle, Strategic Director, described the period of consultation and focus group operation, including residents, people who worked in the area, firms and other local stakeholders. This meeting had been promoted for members of the public to address councillors directly and invitations were sent to members of the public who had wanted to attend other consultation groups but who had been unable to do so.

Tricia Smith and Libby Britcher, Research and Change Officers, explained the consultation with those who lived or worked in Colchester, giving information on the demographics of those involved and showing which Council wards were under- or over-represented within the responses. More women than men had responded, with a number of respondents declining to give a gender and some identifying as non-binary. There was strong representation from the age groups 25-34 and 64+.

Positives and negatives were raised about living and working in Colchester, but most respondents agreed that they enjoyed living or working here. The main priorities which had been raised were ranked according to how many people raised them, with 'safe, healthy, active communities' ranked highest, being mentioned by 60.4% of respondents. Second was 'a fair economy, so all benefit' being mentioned by 39.5% of respondents. Third was the priority of addressing the climate challenge, at 37.3%.

25% of responses gave the city centre as a priority, dealing with transformation, addressing of perceived decline and some mentions of safety issues.

Priorities for Council spending saw 85% of responses wanting environmental work to be prioritised and 35.9% supporting spending on the related work on parks and open spaces. The lowest priority given for spending was for corporate functions, mentioned by only 0.9% of responses. A general consensus was that people wanted the Council to maintain its oversight of services, even where these were contracted to the private sector. Concern was raised that corners would be cut without the presence of strong Council oversight of work done.

The Research and Change Officers described the wide variety of interlocking issues which had been raised. These included city centre regeneration, filling of retail units, mending of pavements and making best use of cultural and heritage assets to increase tourism. It was noted that 13% of respondents felt negatively about receiving city status and comments were received on perceived negative effects on the city centre, caused by local retail parks. Youth service provision, perceived lack of infrastructure and transport/travel problems had been raised and, whilst the overall support for environmental action was high, a number of pro-car comments had also been received.

Themes had been identified and the used to direct the discussion groups, with the approach being described. A key theme raised was the importance of a joined-up approach to improvements within communities across all wards, with a long-term focus on what is wanted for the future. People underlined the wish for Colchester to keep its own identity but to seek inspiration from good ideas from elsewhere too. The potential city centre changes were covered, with a potential for its use to shift from retail to residential and experiences [e.g., entertainments, social use, culture and food and drink provision].

Youth empowerment was discussed, which included engagement with pupils in local schools to explore what young people could do and to empower, rather than discourage from engagement. It was important to choose the right communication channels and to clarify whether young people in the area wanted more empowerment.

The relationship between city centre and retail parks was covered, with positives of both types of retail experience brought up by participants in discussion groups. Views were given that the city centre was more about experiences, whilst retail parks generally provided convenience. Issue, solutions and ideas were considered to improve use of the city centre and retail parks, with ways sought for retail parks to feed into and complement the city centre.

Regarding environment issues, this discussion group's participants all used the Council's garden waste service, but not many would pay for such a service. None of the participants had a wheelie bin, with opinions split roughly equally between those who did want one and those who did not. Keen interest was expressed in ways to expand recycling options.

The Panel discussed the methodology and evidence base for the consultation and information-gathering work. More information was requested about how the data was gathered and percentages of population/statistics given and how demographics of respondents related to the overall demographics of the Colchester populace. The Research and Change Officers explained that the population of the Borough (as was) at the last census had been around 192,000. Percentages of population (e.g., in regard to percentage of population who responded to the consultation) were calculated based on that figure.

A Panel member raised concern that the response rate was under 1%, with views being drawn from a small sample and a 'digital first' approach to engagement excluding some demographics from participation, where individuals often had limited access to the internet. The Research and Change Officers explained that officers had done what was possible within the budget set for the consultation. Non-digital options were possible if more money and officer time could be allocated to the project. Sampling based on demographics gave residents equal opportunities to take part, and options for residents to respond were outlined.

Councillor King, Leader of the Council, identified the online survey as a supplement to the wider consultation exercise with the public and councillors. It had not been possible to achieve a perfect sampling, but the sample had been a significant one. The Leader of the Council pledged to endeavour to make all councillors a part of the ongoing consultation work.

The Panel discussed the demographics of the respondents to the online survey, with concern at the problems caused by it being only online, but acknowledgment that the face-to-face consultation sessions mitigating these to an extent. A range of views were given by members, including on travel needs, wheelie bin provision, GP provision, parking options and use of heritage assets. Waste collection was discussed, with a view given that the different options should be considered, and that it should be shown to people why costly options were unaffordable. Improvements to

infrastructure would require significant planning and a wider focus than purely on housing numbers. A member urged the Panel to give residents another chance to give their views at its next meeting.

Concern was expressed by some members at their view that the survey was focussed on the City's centre and ignored rural areas. It was posited that the surveying of Colchester needed greater breakdown into different areas, with a Panel member urging greater use of data held by the Council to identify a range of people of which to ask questions. Local centres included the city centre, Stanway and Northern Gateway. A Panel member argued that a long term view should be being taken and that a wider consultation should be carried out, including rural residents and questions on issues affecting the different parts of the Council's area. The Research and Change Officers explained that consultation had been carried out with parish and town councils. The Strategic Director gave assurance that the consultation work had not been intended to be city-centric and that he would raise this concern with the Communications Team. A residents panel was to be set up for ongoing engagement and demographics would need to be monitored to improve the representativeness of those involved. A Panel member suggested dropping use of the phrase 'Just Colchester', in order to make this project more inclusive.

A Panel member noted that survey response rates were lower for Council wards which were further from the city centre. Concern was expressed about the lack of input from those under the age of 18 and that more needed to be done to gain responses from age demographics where response rates were low. Another member of the Panel agreed with the need for inclusivity, but stressed the financial pressures which placed limits on what could be done. There could be scope for youth representation from school councils, potentially engaging with resident panels.

A Panel member expressed the importance of protecting open spaces, dealing with parking, traffic and road issues, and the need to educate people in alternatives to car use. Community facilities were put forward as helping new residents to bed in to communities and engage with them.

Answering questions, the Research and Change Officers explained that more information could be given on the comments made regarding lack of infrastructure, but that these could not be used to give statistics or percentages. Having been asked how scoping and selection for the resident panel had been conducted, the Officers informed the Panel that they had engaged with existing groups, cognisant of the danger of producing an echo chamber. Work would be conducted to bring in representatives of those groups underrepresented. The aim was to target those most affected by issues in question and help would be needed to with outreach. Additional staffing resource would also be necessary. The Strategic Director emphasised that the officers who had conducted the surveying and consultation had designed the project within the parameters they had been set and suggested that the Panel seemed to wish to alter the parameters and widen and continue consultation. Panel members suggested use of community newsletters and other options.

Councillor Cox, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage, agreed that the methodology employed was important that those planning the city status programme would take on the ideas raised. The next step was the year of celebration. Big events were planned, to draw tourists and focus on heritage across the area. Part of this

would involve community-generated ideas, and the Portfolio Holder named a selection of these. Legacy planning continued to be worked upon.

Addressing wishes to increase youth engagement, the Portfolio Holder told the Panel of the setting up of the 'Democracy in Schools' programme which could be part of this engagement.

The Leader of the Council reiterated the promise that the Council would listen to all views, and recognised the hard work of the officers who had carried out the consultative work programme. This had covered master-planning for the city centre, working with the County Council. Cabinet would continue to take on views and recommendations and the whole consultation included surveying, consultation sessions, councillors, committees and local stakeholders and partners. Over 11,000 survey responses had been received.

The Chairman asked if further invitations to take part could be sent to those who had yet to respond. The Strategic Director cautioned that this would be dependent on whether there was sufficient officer time and resources.

*RECOMMENDED* to CABINET that Cabinet focus on the importance of obtaining views from young people [under 18], and residents who were digitally excluded.

*RESOLVED* that the Panel would review the final report on the consultation/survey at its next meeting, with an additional opportunity for public views to be given.

#### **60. Colchester Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy development proposal**

**Councillor Kevin 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, Group Manager – Neighbourhood Services, laid out the proposals in the report, for the Policy Panel to work on putting together the Strategy. The Panel were given the background to the existing and legacy policies and strategies covering the range of matters which would be included. It was proposed that the Panel set direction for the strategy which would include open spaces, natural assets, waterways and coastline, using a series of workshops to produce ideas to bring to a future meeting of the Panel for formal consideration and recommendations to be considered for making to Cabinet. A pilot project had already been undertaken with the University of Essex on participatory strategic development.

Approval was given by one Panel member for the plans to include coastline within a strategy like this for the first time by the Council. Examples were given of the coastline and waterway issues which would need to be considered, including environmental concerns and recreational use of them as assets.

The Panel discussed the format of the workshops and were told by the Group Manager that the proposal was for all Panel members to participate, supported by herself and relevant officers, as well as the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability. The workshops would work on how to put the strategy together,

examine the pilot project with the University, examine the data and use them to develop key themes. The Group manager agreed that each geographic areas would need its own tailored approach.

The Group Manager was asked if the workshops have published agendas which could be circulated to all elected members and whether all elected members would be allowed to take part. The Group Manager agreed that options to maximise involvement, including by stakeholders and partners, could be discussed with the Portfolio Holder, and noted that reports on the workshops would be brought back to the Panel's future meetings, which would be recorded.

Panel members expressed support for the suggestion of making the working group open to all councillors, making use of their knowledge and skills, however one member did caution that whilst engagement would be important, it could be hard to focus when meetings included more and more people. Rory Doyle, Strategic Director, underlined this concern, noting that unwieldy large workshops would be difficult to manage and, whilst views should be collected from as wide a pool as possible, a core group was needed to move the Strategy forward. There would be other ways for others to contribute views and ideas to the Strategy.

A further suggestion was made that the City Council should appoint a champion to lead on matters of landscape management, conservation and use, on behalf of the Portfolio Holder and wider Council as a part of addressing climate change.

The Panel discussed the looking at linkages between different green spaces and how they should be developed in the strategy, helping to ensure biodiversity and wildlife migration.

The Panel considered whether it would be possible to hold joint meetings with the Environment and Sustainability Panel.

It was noted that the report did not include a register of the City Council's land and coastal assets, and a Panel member expressed the need to know what the Council owned directly, and the areas in which it could exert influence on others, requesting an asset register.

A Panel member suggested that an addition should be made to the list of considerations at 5.5 of the report, to say that the Strategy would need to be in line with the Council's priorities, as defined by Cabinet. A further member posited that Cabinet would need to liaise with the Planning Team over the strategy on issues such as access.

The Group Manager explained that the workshops would be informal meetings between Policy Panel and officers, describing how the pilot scheme for participatory governance around the River Colne had worked, examining risk, challenges, opportunities and funding matters. Details would be brought to the workshops and the Panel's steer would be sought on the work proceeding, and development of the Strategy. This was expected to be an eighteen-month programme.

The Chairman urged officers to make sure that they informed the Environment and Sustainability Panel of what each of the workshop sessions would be discussing.

Councillor King, Leader of the Council, welcomed the views given and gave his commitment to using councillors' abilities and knowledge, praising the positives that these brought to the Council.

## **61. Work Programme 2022-23**

Owen Howell, Democratic Service Officer, provided an update on matters relating to the Government's bringing in of requirements for voters to show photographic ID when voting. The secondary legislation needed for this to come into effect for May 2023 was now proceeding through Parliament. The Council's Monitoring Officer was of the view that it would not be possible to prepare a meaningful report for the Panel's January meeting, and that the meeting on March 1 would give the time needed for the legislation to come into force. The Panel discussed how they thought this subject should be handled and came to the view that an all-member briefing from the Monitoring Officer in February would be the best way to examine the Council's implementation plans to carry out its new responsibilities, and to inform councillors of the new requirements on voters.

*RECOMMENDED* to the PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR RESOURCES that the Monitoring Officer hold an all-member briefing in February 2023 to cover the new requirements for voters to show photographic ID, and the Council's actions to meet its new duties relating to this.

*RESOLVED* that: -

- 1) An item be added to the agenda for 11 January 2023 to further discuss the emerging Strategic Plan
- 2) Future meetings of the Policy Panel receive update reports on the work done by Panel members in the workshops relating to the Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy.