

SCRUTINY PANEL

8 November 2022

Present:- Cllr Willetts (Chair), Cllr Lissimore (Vice Chair), Cllr Laws, Cllr McCarthy, Cllr Scordis

Substitute Member:- Cllr Barton for Cllr Smith
Cllr S. McLean for Cllr Lilley

Also in Attendance:- Cllr Lesley Scott-Boutell

370. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2022 were confirmed as a true record. It was noted that a query regarding the form of the minutes was raised by Councillor Lissimore.

371. Items requested by Members of the panel and other Members

The Committee had before them two requests of items to scrutinise which were detailed in the agenda.

The Chair (Councillor Dennis Willetts) requested that the panel scrutinise the Plans for City Status be scrutinised at the point where the strategy was relatively concrete but before the delivery plans are defined.

The Chair also requested that the Scrutiny Panel reviews the One Colchester Partnership to ensure that it was operating at peak effectiveness.

The Panel discussed the two requests from Councillor Willetts where it was established that there was broad support for scrutiny of both items.

RESOLVED that the Panel receives:-

- (a) A report on the proposed plans for City Status and that this is brought before the Panel prior to the delivery plans being defined.
- (b) A report reviewing the One Colchester Partnership to ensure that the Partnership is working at peak effectiveness.

372. Update on Town Deal Projects

The Executive Director for Place presented the report to the Panel and explained that 14 projects were currently underway with 8 being led by partners but were ultimately accountable to the Council. It was noted that there was a strong Governance structure in place with a large amount of engagement on projects most notably with Jumbo. The Panel heard that business cases had been submitted in March 2022 to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUC) and permission had been given to

proceed in August 2022 with the initial funding being provided. It was noted that the RAG risk approach was currently on amber as some of projects were very complex. The Executive Director for Place confirmed that the risks linked to the projects were reviewed on a continual basis with the main concerns being around escalating costs for labour as well as unexpected delays with supplies. The Panel heard that one of the largest risks was associated with the land acquisition in the heart of Greenstead but that there was no update to give on this. The panel were informed that the aim was to contain any cost issues and that there had been a contribution from Colchester Borough Council for St Nicolas Square which had accelerated the project however it was detailed that archaeology costs had risen. The projects were also being looked at in alignment to try and create efficiencies where it was possible.

The Executive Director for Place explained to the Panel that there was significant oversight of the works from the Town Deal Board and from the Section 151 Officer which had to report into DLUC every six months with the progress of the projects. It was noted that there were no significant risks that would compromise the projects but outlined the following details on each of the projects:

Kerbless Street, Balcerne Gate Phase 2, Holy trinity Square - This project had been delayed until the start of 2023 so that it did not interfere with Christmas events in the town centre.

Essex Pedal Power – The Launch of this project in the spring of 2023 following the completion of purchase of bikes.

Digital Skills hub: - Work is due to start imminently following planning consents being secured.

Townhouse, Stanway and Highwoods Youth Centres – The work on the Townhouse could only begin in the Easter Holidays where structural surveys would be the main priority.

Essex County Hospital: Work on this site would be starting in 2023 and confirmed that the full Town Deal contribution had been released with the enhanced public space part of the wider housing scheme.

Heart of Greenstead: - work had been undertaken to ensure community engagement on the project with the alliance partnership which was progressing well. It was noted that this included the relocation of Hawthorn surgery which was on track for delivery.

Jumbo: - The project which was being delivered through North Essex Heritage had passed the first stage with the Heritage Lottery Fund and would be moving onto the full application stage. Furthermore, the bids to the Heritage Lottery Fund were being co-ordinated between Museums, Jumbo and Holy Trinity to ensure that there were no clashes.

Physical Connectivity: The Connection between Greenstead and the Town Centre through the Active Travel Fund meant that the full route completed to the highest standards which would begin on East Hill.

Matthew Brown, Economic Regeneration Manager outlined the schemes that were underway within the town centre and confirmed that the cost of goods were volatile and were being monitored. The Panel heard that further funds were being sought where possible and confirmed that an extra £2.3 million had been secured for the Heart of Greenstead project through Active Travel. The Economic Regeneration Officer concluded

by outlining that if there were funding issues these would be assessed into what could be done differently on projects and that this would not have an impact on quality.

Councillor William Sunnucks addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) and questioned the timing of the projects and what was slowing them down and whether this meant projects would be cut. The Panel heard that there was a problem of timing with what had been promised and although the board had been formed in 2020 very little progress had been delivered and questioned whether they were still deliverable following the input from the Peer Review. Councillor Sunnucks advised that he was aware of the issues that were causing delays in the Private Sector but wanted an answer on what was causing the delays and questioned whether this effected the Councils credibility when applying for new grants.

The Executive Director for Place responded to the questions and confirmed that the setting up of the Town Deal Board had been a requirement and have been involved in every stage of the process. It was noted that the agreement from DLUC to go beyond the case stage had not been given until August 2022. It was that outlined that some programmes had been sped up, however some had been caught within inflation issues but were still on time for delivery. It was confirmed that Colchester Borough Council were directly managing the digital skills hub and that the framework and the contracts with partners were completed. It was clarified that the Town Houses would take longer to complete and that some of the bids would outlast the timeframes of the Town Deal Fund. Members were asked to note that there was a delay from DLUC which was for three months whilst waiting for the bids to be approved.

The Panel raised questions on the report and its emphasis upon deprivation and the areas that the projects were targeted and what evidence was there that they would materially effect deprivation in those areas. Questions were raised regarding the completed projects such as those at the Mercury Theatre and how these would contribute to ending deprivation as well as whether the projects that were being undertaken as they could be easily completed.

The Economic Regeneration Manager responded that the heart of Greenstead project was a £40 million investment which could make a significant difference and intervene to improve skills. It was noted that the Holy Trinity Church Scheme would be offering services to those who were most in need and the Cycling Hub helped provide transport for those who were on a lower income. The Committee heard that the proposals for the digital skills hub would help people to retrain and give them access to digital skills.

The Panel queried whether match funding was being sought on projects as this had been a key aim within the Fund and heard that additional funding was being sought wherever possible and elaborated that there had been an Active Travel fund of £5 million as well as a possible £5 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund. It was noted that Greenstead's match funding was also through Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which would provide long term regeneration of the area. Concern was raised by the Committee over the lack of key performance indicators for the projects and match funding. The Economic Regeneration Manager responded that there were no specific requirements for match funding or additional funding but commented that as it was only 2 months into the delivery of the project other opportunities may become available. The Executive Director for Place advised Members that the Council would bid for any funding that arose and that a report could be brought back to the Panel on where additional funding was being sought.

Questions were raised from the Panel on the role of the signage changes for the City

Status and it was confirmed that this was part of the City Status work plan and further information on this would be provided to the Committee.

A further question was raised regarding the Councils capital programme difficulties and whether it was linked to the Town Deal and would this cause issues for any for the projects. It was confirmed by officers that the review of the Capital Programme had started but outlined that the majority of the projects were not reliant on the programme and were funded.

The Chair ran through the projects as detailed in the report and Members and Officers contributed the following:

Balkerne gate Phase 2: The project was yet to be completed and that there were conversations being undertaken with Jumbo to ensure that there was minimal disruption.

Jumbo: The National Lottery Heritage fund bid was underway and could take up to a year to progress to the next phase.

Holy Trinity Church – Questions were raised as to whether there was a back-up plan for the use of the Church if Community 360 were unable to take on the facility. The Panel heard that two contingency plans were in place but that if there were any updates on this then this would be reported to the Panel.

Digital Connectivity: The Committee queried the number of jobs that would be created and it was confirmed that this would be 16 direct employees however there would be a much larger impact which would regenerate the area and would aid longer term aspirations in the area.

Transformed Youth Facilities: In response to questions Officers explained that issues with the lease on the Town houses had been resolved and that the funds that were used for the purposes of transforming youth facilities were ringfenced to existing facilities and could not be used in new proposals.

The Panel thanked the Officers for the report and concluded that no recommendations were required to be sent onto the Cabinet.

RESOLVED that the report be noted by the Panel.

373. Family / Local affiliation in letting and/ or sale of local affordable housing and Gateway to Homechoice Allocations Policy

Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) and thanked the Panel for looking into this matter. The Panel heard that over the years they had tried to persuade Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) that Stanway was a rural community and any available housing in the area should be ringfenced for local residents. An example was given whereby a resident had been living with their parents who had been unable to stay in the area and drew attention to paragraph 4.16 of the Committee report. The Panel heard that there were immense pressures whereby 235 people were living in temporary accommodation and there had only been 38 lets in the Stanway area since April 2022. The Councillor outlined that they would like to see applicants who have links to families, situation and the local area changed in the criteria so that these are taken into account when offering people homes.

Councillor Julie Young, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities addressed the Panel ahead of the Officer presentation and spoke of the housing crisis that there was in Colchester and drew Members attention to paragraph 4.16 and the unintended consequences if any changes were made to the prioritisation. The Portfolio holder explained that the Councils approach was consistent with other authorities that the Council was in partnership with and advised Members that there was a pilot which was looking into the issue before the Committee. The Cabinet Member requested that the Scrutiny Panel withhold any recommendations until the pilot scheme had concluded and the results analysed. The Committee did hear that there were occasions where the local lettings policy came into play but these were in very specific cases and drew Members attention to the fact that there was a focus on the 235 people in temporary accommodation and that there were currently 3000 people on the on the Housing register waiting list.

Karen Paton, Housing Strategy Co-ordinator presented the report to the Panel outlining the information that had been requested and detailed the Council's housing allocation policy which was a legal requirement and detailed the prioritisation of need. The Panel heard that any change to the policy would relegate the importance of need when prioritising any other characteristic. The Housing Strategy Co-ordinator outlined that there were two options for securing housing through local lettings plans and also through Section 106 agreements. Local lettings could be on new developments or existing homes and applied to the specified properties with the agreement of the owner and can help improve areas tackling anti-social behaviour and confirmed that this approach had been taken with new build homes. The officer advised that in Section 106 Agreements the number, type, and size of the affordable houses were agreed at the development stage and were a legally binding agreement. It was noted that the report included in appendix A details of shared ownership. Attention was drawn to paragraph 4.16 and the unintended consequences that could ensue and could lead to households with a higher need may have to wait longer if a Family/ local affiliation policy was introduced. The Officer informed Members that there were instances where there was no interest in properties with an example that a rural property was was not near employment centres and public transport links wouldn't make a commute viable.

The Panel were informed that there was a pilot scheme underway in Layer de la Haye where family and local affiliation were being taken into account however it was noted that the pilot may have had more effect in a more built up area.

The Panel questioned the officers regarding the question of need and how this was assessed if someone had moved into the area. The Officer responded that all cases of homelessness had to be assessed under the five tests of homelessness and would be considered on that basis with banding levels taken into account as well as other circumstances which meant assessment on a case by case basis.

Members of the panel praised the Councils services for housing and the work that was being undertaken but were concerned that the efficiency of the team was causing an influx of people from outside of the borough to move into the area to find housing. The Housing Strategy Co-ordinator advised Members that the Gateway to Homechoice register allowed the team to review data of people arriving from other areas and noted that the Council exported more people than importing them into the Council's housing stock.

In response to further questions from the Panel the officer responded that a housing needs survey was carried out for all applicants where they could add preferences of where they would like to live. It was noted from further questions regarding the criteria for housing need that strong and weak affiliations with an area and people could be integrated but

would also be conditional to other factors. The Panel heard that the pilot scheme currently underway had the criteria that the applicants had to live and work in the area so that transport issues could be avoided.

Members debated the content of the report noting that the final decision on this was not within the gift of the Panel and that the distortion of the system through the affiliation had some beneficial outcomes but could lead to the system becoming unmanageable and that the results of the pilot scheme should be assessed before making a recommendation.

RESOLVED that the report is noted by the panel and that when the outcome of the pilot scheme is available then the panel will consider whether it should be returned to the Panel for further consideration.

374. Work Programme 2022-2023

The Committee discussed the workplan and the requirement for additional meetings to discuss the additional items on the workplan including the additional items agreed at the meeting.

Richard Block, Chief Operating Officer advised the Panel that following the outcome of the peer review that the Panel may wish to consider scrutiny of the report.

The Panel agreed that this would be worthwhile and added it to the agenda for the December meeting.

The Panel asked that two additional dates were looked at in the new year to consider the additional items that needed to be scheduled.

RESOLVED that the work programme for 2022-2023 is noted with the additional item of the peer review being added for the December meeting and that officers in consultation with the Chair and Group Spokespersons for the Panel look at and put forward additional dates.