

Extract from the draft minutes of the Policy Panel meeting of 24 November 2021

32. Minutes of Previous Meeting

Concern was raised by a Member of the Panel that the plans for a Covid-19 memorial blossom circle were already agreed and planting about to begin, even though the Panel were expecting to receive a formal report on options in order to be able to make recommendations to Cabinet regarding this before plans were finalised. It was argued that the site chosen, Kings Head Meadow [North of Castle Park, Colchester], was not accessible for members of the public with reduced mobility and was not appropriate. Other Panel members agreed and voiced concern that the Panel had been circumvented, having expected the matter to come back before the Panel so that recommendations could be made to the Portfolio Holder. There was also no chance to call in the decision. Panel members posited that a message should be sent to Cabinet that communications need to be better, in the spirit of cooperation and goodwill, and that the Panel must be given opportunities to make recommendations.

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director – Environment, explained that the intention had not been to mislead the Panel and that the plan had been to take the proposed site for approval by the Portfolio Holder and report back to the Policy Panel. Other commemoration actions were planned. Insufficient funding was available for planting multiple blossom circle sites across the whole Borough unless external funding was sourced. Officers were looking at alternatives which could be rolled out or supported.

Panel members expressed dissatisfaction that members had not been briefed on the blossom circle going ahead and instead learned about it via the local newspaper. A Panel member informed the Panel that Sir Bob Russell, High Steward of Colchester, also had concerns regarding the location of the blossom circle and had been told that the Policy Panel had approved the site. The Panel had not approved or recommended this site and this point needed to be clarified. The Panel had not recommended specific sites but had recommended that sites be found across the Borough. A suggestion which had been made was Trinity Church churchyard, in Colchester Town Centre, as a location which would allow people to come together for quiet reflection. Panel members confirmed that this was still a site that they felt should be looked at.

It was noted that the tree planting in Stanway had been cancelled, and detail was requested as to any Council plans to plant a blossom circle or memorial tree for the Stanway community. With reference to the planting season just beginning, a Panel

member suggested that the Policy Panel could put forth suggestions for planting sites as recommendations to Cabinet or the Portfolio Holder.

The Assistant Director – Environment informed the Panel that a number of tree planting schemes were commencing across the Borough as part of the Colchester Woodland & Biodiversity Project starting with the Blossom Circles at Kings Head Meadow on 27 November 2021. Members of the local community had been able to apply to join the planting day and a second planting day had been arranged with NHS staff, volunteer groups and community groups on 1 December 2021. Consultation on the site had been carried out and invitations now issued to guests for the planting. Regarding the planned planting on the Stanway site, unexpected archaeological issues at that site meant that planting had to be cancelled.

A Panel member argued that the finance made available was insufficient and that more was needed so as to allow planting to take place across the Borough in a meaningful way. The Assistant Director explained that the £10k initial funding was a fund for the Civic Team to coordinate a commemorative event proposed to take place in March 2022 but this is still in the stages of planning. Partner funding and donations were also being sourced to support this. The tree planting had been funded separately through the Woodland and Biodiversity Project and from funding for Cabinet priorities. There were significant numbers of other planting sites across the Borough as part of this programme.

The Panel considered the commemoration event, with one view being that Charter Hall was not the right venue and would not have the appropriate atmosphere.

A member of the Panel informed the Panel that a member of the public who had planned to attend and speak on the commemoration plans and planting had not been able to attend. She grieved her relatives lost to the pandemic and had wanted to make her view known that the blossom circle site in Kings Head Meadow would not be accessible to her and that a more inclusive position should have been found.

RESOLVED that: -

- a) The Chairman of the Policy Panel would write to Cabinet to express the Panel's disquiet and concerns regarding the handling of Covid-19 memorials and the lack of opportunity for Policy Panel to make recommendations;
- b) The Chairman of the Policy Panel would invite the Portfolio Holder to the next meeting of the Policy Panel [12 January 2022] to answer questions on plans and actions for Covid-19 memorial sites and events, and to hear the concerns of the Policy Panel;
- c) The minutes of the meetings held on 22 September 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that Cabinet consider the Policy Panel's suggestions regarding the siting of memorials, including for a town centre memorial to be provided in a location such as the church yard of Trinity Church.