

Environment and Sustainability Panel

19 July 2022

Present:	Councillor Tracey Arnold (Deputy Chair) Councillor Molly Bloomfield Councillor Michelle Burrows Councillor Mark Goacher Councillor Sue Lissimore Councillor Lee Scordis (Chair) Councillor Michael Spindler
Substitutes:	Councillor Laws for Councillor Lewis Barber Councillor Smithson for Councillor Andrew Ellis Councillor Warnes for Councillor Kayleigh Rippingale

72. Have Your Say!

The Panel had received a written representation from Kemal Cufoglu, which was read out by Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer. Mr Cufoglu's representation was on behalf of the Green Action Team and Pesticide Free Essex. He noted that he had asked the Panel for information in February 2022 in relation to Colchester Borough Council (the Council)'s use of glyphosate, and raised a number of questions in respect of this. He mentioned that an alternative herbicide was planned to be used in a car park maintained by the Council, and he asked for information about the type of herbicide, the name of the car park, and the perceived effectiveness of the trial. He also sought feedback from the Panel on the public perception of Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) and the Council's transition to more environmentally friendly methods of weed control, and requested clarification on which non-glyphosate alternatives and maintenance methods were being used. Pesticide Free Essex had been approached by Councillors and residents of neighbouring districts who had been inspired by Colchester's example, and Mr Cufoglu hoped that the Council would share its experiences and expertise to assist partner organisations in their own projects.

Mr Cufoglu further advised the Panel that in commemoration of the International Day of Action for Protecting Rivers, he had carried out tests of the water in the River Colne in his role as the Activism Officer for the Colchester Green Party. These tests had revealed E. coli, and detected heavy metals potentially ten to 1000 times higher than the legal limits, chloride which was 11 times the legal limit, sulphate which was potentially above the United Kingdom legal limit, as well as very high alkalinity levels. Mr Cufoglu expressed his great disappointment that both Anglia Water and the Environment Agency had declined to carry out confirmatory testing, as the water was not designated as bathing water, and the Environment Agency was therefore not obliged to monitor it. The Panel was requested to reach out to these organisations to invite them to take the necessary steps to safeguard public health.

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager – Neighbourhood Services responded to some of the points which had been raised and confirmed that a full list of the car parks and garage blocks had been used to test a different herbicide called Katoun Gold would be provided by way of written response. All the sites had been examined in June 2022, and there was little or no difference between the sites which had been treated and those which hadn't, however, continuous monitoring would be carried out in the future. There had been no change in the volume of calls that had been received by CBH as a result of the changes, and steps had been taken to publicise these as widely as possible to tenants. A detailed review would be carried out at the end of summer. A number of different methods of weed control were being trialled, including strimming, hand weeding and mulching, and new methods would be incorporated into the maintenance regime as and when these became available. The Council was happy to share the knowledge and experience that it had gained from the trials with partner organisations.

A Panel member expressed concern that although the Council as an organisation may not be experiencing a higher volume of complaints, it was their opinion that individual Councillors were experiencing a larger number of complaints, and some Councillors had been forced to purchase battery powered strimming equipment to tackle excess weeds in their Wards. It was requested that a detailed report be presented to the Panel in the future containing information about the weed control methods which were currently being used, and the plans that were in place for the forthcoming year.

Councillor Scordis, the Chair of the Panel, requested that the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability be requested to work with Officers to potentially address the concerns which had been raised in respect of the river Colne.

The Panel had received an additional written representation from Andrew Wilkinson, who was representing En-form, which was read out by Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer. Although En-form supported the Council's efforts in attempting to improve the environmental performance of Colchester, it also expressed concerns that the Council's ecology policies appeared to be weaker now than they had been in the past, and requested confirmation of what the Council's biodiversity policy was. It was considered that a number of Council actions over the preceding years had potentially been harmful to wildlife habitats, including the removal of ancient hedgerow at Salary Brook and the inclusion of Middlewick Range in the Local Plan for housing development. The Panel was asked to consider whether it was time to update the Wildlife Site Review, which had not been updated since December 2008, and further consider whether a biodiversity group should be set up with representations from local ecologists and wildlife groups to help inform ecological decisions.

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director – Environment, confirmed that discussions were currently underway concerning the development Council's Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, and he considered that this emerging Strategy would provide an opportunity to discuss all the Council's policies and procedures relating to the management of natural spaces. Panel members would be a key part of developing the scops, principle and objectives of the Strategy, and once this work had been finalised, the Council would be in a position to update its other policies and

procedures. The Council did not have a specific biodiversity policy, however, the principles of reducing impact, retaining, rewilding and restoring were at the core of its Woodland and Biodiversity project. A full written response would be provided to Mr Wilkinson addressing all the issues which he had raised.

Peter Chisnall attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with the Have Your Say! provisions. The Panel heard that Mr Chisnall was a trustee of En-form, and was a chartered Water and Environmental Manager, and had been a Colchester resident all his life. He considered that water was a precious resource, and climate change meant that access to water was becoming more unpredictable, and one of the biggest challenges being faced in the world today. The East Anglian water region received one third less rainfall than the rest of the United Kingdom, and was classified as semi-arid, and in addition to this, it has been stated that the population of Colchester used more water per head than the national average. As a large organisation, a reduction in the Council's use of water would have a significant knock-on effect in Colchester as a whole, including wetland habitats and other areas of biodiversity. Mr Chisnall requested that the Council consider conducting a water audit and set a reasonable, but high-impact, target to lower water use in CBC and CBH buildings.

Rory Doyle assured the Panel that the Council's Climate Action Checklist which related to all Council projects contained a requirement for Officers to consider environmental impact, and the consideration of water use and quality was particularly encouraged. The suggestion that the Council carry out a water audit would be considered by Officers outside the meeting.

Grace Darke attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with the Have Your Say! provisions. The Council had declared a climate emergency in July 2019, and although the Eco-Colchester community had been as supportive as it could to the Council since this time, Grace expressed alarm at some of the actions that had been taken by the Council. These included the decision to include a local nature reserve in the Local Plan, despite expert advice to the contrary, and the removal of ancient hedgerow at Salary Brook, which had resulted in no sanctions being taken against the developer. Grace suggested that many trees that had been planted by the Council had been poorly cared for and had died, and the Council had been intending to plant trees on meadowland against advice, which had only been stopped at the last minute by public pressure. In the light of this, both Colchester Natural History Society and Essex Wildlife Trust have requested that references to partnerships with them to be removed from Council literature. Taking all of the points that she had made into account, Grace asked whether the Council would now revoke its declared climate and biodiversity emergency, or, if there was no such revocation, what immediate proposals could be announced to repair the damage done to the environment and the Council's credibility.

Rory Doyle assured the Panel that Officers welcomed scrutiny and challenge and worked with stakeholders including ecologists and Colchester Natural History Society. Although agreement was not possible in all cases, different options were presented wherever possible in relation to the Council's proposals. It was noted that an update on the Woodland and Biodiversity project would be provided to the Panel

in the future, which would contain extensive detail around some of the projects which Grace had alluded to.

A Panel member spoke in support of the suggestion of the setting up of an ecological panel to consider current or upcoming issues and projects and feed into action which the Council may take. They felt that it was important to heed the advice of ecology experts as much as possible, and considered that protection and promotion of biodiversity was the result of more activity than just planting trees.

Andrew Tyrrell, Client and Business Manager, attended the meeting remotely and addressed the Panel in respect of the comments which had been made in the meeting with regard to the removal of ancient hedgerow at Salary Brook. He completely refuted the suggestion that the Council had allowed the hedgerow to be removed, and explained that in fact works took place which had not been permitted, and the Council had acted very quickly to put in place mitigation to limit the impact of those works, and to repair the damage which had already taken place.

Rory Doyle assured the Panel that Officers worked with a wide range of stakeholders as closely as possible in delivering its projects, and Grace Darke reinforced her belief that continuous training was of key importance for both Officers and Councillors to ensure that all had a grasp of the importance of the challenges that were faced.

73. Blue and Green Infrastructure Strategy

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager – Neighbourhood Services attended the meeting to provide the Panel with a verbal update on the Colchester Borough Council (the Council)'s emerging Blue and Green Infrastructure Strategy. The 'Green' element of the strategy concerned all of Colchester's open and green spaces used by communities, residents and businesses, and the 'Blue' element of the strategy would deal with lakes, rivers and coastlines across the borough. The Strategy would recognise the importance of Colchester's natural assets to its residents, and help support the effective management of these once the grounds maintenance contract had been brought back 'in house' at the Council. Work on the Strategy had been undertaken with the University of Essex, and it was intended to bring a much more comprehensive report back to the Panel at its September meeting, which would include the report compiled by the University.

In response to an enquiry from a Panel Member, it was confirmed that with regard to the 'Blue' element of the Strategy, the initial focus would be on publicly accessible areas of water which were in the main managed by the Council, however, stakeholder involvement would also be very important. It was considered unlikely that privately owned lakes would be included within the scope of the discussion unless these were publicly accessible, however, further exploratory work would be undertaken to understand the scope and availability of these waters.

A Panel member supported the increased use of the waterways in the Borough, and noted that designated bathing water status could possibly be obtained in the future for some stretches of water. A careful balance was necessary in the Strategy to ensure that the practical effects of increased usage of waterways was considered on

the natural environment, together with potential issues such as additional tree canopy interfering with existing closed circuit television coverage (CCTV) of both green and blue areas.

A Panel member requested that consideration be given to the development of a dedicated website which would allow residents to make comments on the development of the Strategy, and encourage them to feel included and engaged with the development process. It was suggested that this would also help to publicise the Strategy and help keep residents informed, and the Panel considered that the Strategy could provide a useful starting point for the development of a community action group to encourage and nurture this sort of engagement.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the verbal update be noted.

74. Climate Emergency Action Plan Update

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel heard that actions and highlights from Colchester Borough Council (the Council)'s Climate Emergency Action Plan were presented to it at every meeting. It was confirmed to the Panel that a training session would be delivered to all Councillors in September focussing on Colchester Borough Council (the Council)'s climate change and sustainability work, and written content would be provided to Councillors after this.

A Panel member noted that it had recently been a national 'Clean Air Day', however, they had been made aware of the problem of cars idling outside schools, and understood that Council Officers did not challenge this behaviour or issue fixed penalty tickets for engine idling. It was considered that the issue of idling outside schools should be addressed, and information was requested on how this could be progressed, with an item potentially being added to the work programme in the future. Andrew Tyrrell, Client and Business Manager, attended the meeting remotely and advised the Panel that the Council was not currently able to issue fixed penalty notices to motorists who left their vehicle engines idling, and there was a process to be followed before such notices could be issued. He supported the addition of an item to the work programme of the Panel at a future date to further explore this issue, but did comment that to date, the Council had taken an educational approach to the issue rather than adopting an aggressive enforcement strategy. Ben Plummer confirmed that schools were able to request banners to display outside their gates promoting the values of the Council's CAREless scheme, designed to reduce air pollution, and details of how to do this could be circulated outside the meeting. The Panel accepted the need for education to encourage behaviour change, however, it also considered that the Council did need the capacity to issue fixed penalty notices as a last resort, and it was suggested that a new Policy covering this activity was needed as soon as possible.

Jason Butcher, Group Development Manager North for Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP), attended the meeting to give the Panel a presentation on the transition of the Council's fleet to electric vehicles (EV). Twelve EV charging points had been installed in Rowan House, which were intended to support up to twenty Council

vehicles, although it was hoped that there may be capacity for these to be used by staff and visitors to the site as well. Ten charging points had also been installed at St Johns car park which were shared between the Council and NEPP. The electrical capacity in this location was limited, however, this had been balanced through the use of dynamic load balancing which equally spread the available capacity across the number of vehicles which were charging at any one time to give optimal available performance. The charging system was monitored closely via a computer system which provided data such as the carbon offset provided by every charge as well as usage monitoring. The NEPP was using five electric vehicles, and the Council currently had six, and feedback from staff who used the vehicles had been encouraging.

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager – Neighbourhood Services, explained that with the exception of the NEPP, the Council's Neighbourhood Services team managed the fleet of the Authority. Cabinet had approved a Fleet Transition Forward Plan, which set out short, medium and long term goals to moving the Council's fleet to a carbon neutral position, and all of the Council's small vehicle fleet would comprise of electric vehicles within the next couple of years. Other solutions for environmentally friendly vehicles would be considered as and when new technology became available.

The Panel were assured that consideration was being given to the installation of more electric vehicle charging points for public use, and heard that the Council had recently trialled an electric refuse vehicle, which had some operational limitations but which had been reported as being a very pleasant environment for the crew to be working in. Further trials with different vehicles were being sought, and different solutions were being considered.

The Panel discussed the possibility of providing assistance to Parish Councils who wished to install electric vehicle charging infrastructure, and Officers confirmed that this would be considered, however, the lack of government funding at the present time, coupled with the expense installations could limit the options available. Consideration would be given to subsidising parking charges for electric vehicles.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

75. Work Programme 2022-2023

Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries.

The Panel discussed potential items which it might like to consider adding to the work programme in the future, and noted that areas which had been discussed at the meeting were due to be considered at the November meeting of the Panel in relation to the Clean Air for Colchester campaign, and the Council's own work in relation to emission reduction.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the work programme be noted.