

Scrutiny Panel

Tuesday, 15 December 2020

Attendees: Councillor Lewis Barber, Councillor Kevin Bentley, Councillor Tina Bourne, Councillor Paul Dundas, Councillor Chris Hayter, Councillor Mike Hogg, Councillor Sam McCarthy, Councillor Lorcan Whitehead

Apologies:
Substitutes:

285 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 13 October 2020 be confirmed as a correct record.

286 Decisions taken under special urgency provisions

Councillor Bentley informed the Panel that a decision had been taken by Cabinet regarding the mechanism for payment of Covid-19 related support grants to local businesses. This had been an urgent matter and had been agreed to by Councillor Bentley, as Chairman of the Scrutiny Panel.

287 Items requested by members of the Panel and other Members

Councillor Scordis presented his request for the Scrutiny Panel to further consider the provision of bus services in Colchester Borough. Cllr Scordis stressed the importance of buses to the local economy, to assisting in modal shift [regarding travel options] and in reducing car use to the benefit of the environment. Colchester services were currently poor. Many had been cancelled and they were often costly to use and/or unreliable.

Councillor Scordis noted that the Panel's previous examination of this issue had been productive but was of the view that no follow-up had been carried out and that it would be worth examining whether service provision and usage had improved. Various options had been suggested, such as use of hopper/mini buses, family tickets and other ways to encourage usage of the service. Councillor Scordis requested that the Panel again invite the bus service providers to a meeting to give an update on the current challenges, improvement plans and passenger statistics. The Chairman agreed that the bus services were not up to the level at which they should be but noted that they were improving.

The Panel agreed that an update should come to a future meeting, to which service providers should be invited. The Panel discussed the possibility that this could entail constructive scrutiny of bus provision and the challenges faced by providers, and then be followed, should Cabinet approve, with a consideration of the issue by the Policy Panel, with a view to advise on any policy change or addition relating to the Council's approach to bus services, which it might then recommend to Cabinet.

The Panel then considered what it would wish to discuss when it next convened as

the Colchester Crime and Disorder Committee [on 16 February 2021]. The Chairman asked officers to ensure that updates were provided on the Covid-19-related work from each of the partner organisations, data relating to changing crime figures and compliance work. Officers were also asked to invite the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner [PFCC], or his Deputy, to the meeting.

A Panel member asked whether it would be possible for the Committee to receive a ward-by-ward breakdown of criminal activity, especially that relating to county lines and drug operations. It was felt that it would not be possible to break information down to a ward level, but that a way should be found to present some level of area-by-area breakdown for the Committee.

The Panel requested that specific information be presented relating to domestic abuse and violence, with an update on how levels of these offences have changed over 2020-21 and how partner organisations have responded to tackle this abuse and violence. A specific request was made for data relating to police call-outs, repeat call-outs and mitigating actions instituted to address cases.

A request was made by the Panel for a report on how the Police's role has changed over the past three years, including details of situations and incidents where officers now attend, which previously would not have elicited attendance or a response from the Police. A request was also made for an explanation of the role and work of the 'Covid Marshals', including how they work with the Police and how their performance is measured.

Councillor Mark Cory, Leader of the Council, spoke, with permission of the Chairman, and suggested that representatives of the 'One Colchester' Partnership be invited to participate. The Partnership had provided regular updates throughout the period of Covid-19-related restrictions and the Leader suggested that the Partnership could help provide information on areas where positive action had been taken, such as increasing mental-health related support. This suggestion was agreed by the Panel.

The Panel also asked that a representative from CALC [Colchester Association of Local Councils] be invited to attend and explain work that had been undertaken by parish councils, especially in rural areas.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Panel:

- (a) Would add an agenda item to its work programme to allow an update on local bus service provision, and for scrutiny to be carried out on the current situation facing bus users and operators. The scheduling of this is set out in a full resolution under minute 285 [Work Programme 2020-21].
- (b) Would recommend that Cabinet ask the Policy Panel to consider and make recommendations on any ideas relating to improving bus service provision as raised by the Scrutiny Panel, especially those relating to policy options to help drive improvement in bus service provision within the Borough.
- (c) Had agreed the information and data that it wished to see come before the next meeting of the Crime and Disorder Committee, as noted in this minute [283], and that

the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (or his Deputy), representatives of 'One Colchester' and the Colchester Association of Local Councils be invited to attend and answer questions.

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Half Year 2020 - 2021 Performance Report including progress on 2020-2023 Strategic Plan Action Plan

Councillor Julie Young, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Performance and Deputy Leader of the Council, introduced the report, which included a report requested by the Panel and giving an update on the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Council's work relating to it. The Deputy Leader explained her view that the Council should maintain its current Key Performance Indicator Targets, rather than revise them, and concentrate on mitigating risks and negative effects of the pandemic.

Councillor Mark Cory, Leader of the Council, echoed and endorsed the Deputy Leader's introduction and explained his wish to seek Scrutiny Panel's views on the Strategic Plan Action Plan for the coming year.

Richard Block, Assistant Director for Corporate and Improvement Services, informed the Panel that good progress had been achieved on the new strategic priorities which had been agreed alongside the 2020-21 budgets.

The Panel discussed the targets and their views regarding the setting of targets for 2021-22. Several members spoke in favour of not changing targets in the short term, given the uncertainty and effects caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions in place. A Panel member argued that it would be unfair to ask officers to suggest targets, when there was no way to predict what the coming municipal year would hold. A recommendation was made that as much effort as possible was focussed on the life-enhancing targets. The Recovery Plan was noted as a good way to help shape targets, once there is a better understanding of the long-term and economic impacts of the pandemic.

A Panel member argued that keeping the current targets and monitoring progress would help the Council to judge the effects of Covid-19 on performance.

A view was requested as to how well the Council was expected to perform against the target for providing additional homes. Councillor Adam Fox, Portfolio Holder for Housing, explained that many construction sites had closed down during lockdown, but it was expected by the Housing Team that there would be an increase in delivery in coming months and into 2021-22. The Deputy Leader informed the Panel that the Council would be recruiting to a new post within the Planning Team, in the coming year, that would involve work to meet the target for provision of new homes, and that it was right to consider how planning matters were managed during the year.

The Panel welcomed the inclusion of certain long-term projects, such as the Stanway Community Centre, in the report.

Regarding questions on rent collection, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that it remained an ambitious target, with performance expected to be helped by an improved interface with the benefits system and a new housing management system being introduced.

A Panel member explained their view that environmental policies should use a 'carrot and stick' approach toward influencing behaviour changes, and that a regressive taxation policy should be eschewed. It was especially important to avoid over-taxing families on low incomes.

A query was raised regarding the performance against Indicator K1W2, where the 'Average' values for each month were shown as being always lower than the 'Actual by Month' values recorded.

The Panel also questioned how rates of sick leave were being recorded as being better (lower) than the target rate. Councillor David King, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources, noted that the broad range of sickness types meant that it was hard to give an overall view of leave taken. The Council had worked to minimise the Covid-related risk to staff and had been working for some years to address and reduce rates of long-term sickness-related absences. A focus had been to ensure that officers could report any need for assistance and get support where needed. The Deputy Leader added that many waste crew offices had needed to isolate during the first lockdown, and that the Council's adoption of a new Wellbeing Strategy appeared to be improving the situation relating to sickness rates.

The Assistant Director for Corporate and Improvement Services noted the likelihood that the new, remote, ways of working had acted to reduce non-Covid-related sickness rates (including colds and 'flu infections).

The Assistant Director was asked to explain a drop in recycling rates in August and agreed to discuss this with the Assistant Director – Environment to find an answer to this question. A Panel member queried why the statistics for K1W1 [Residual Household Waste per Household] seemed to show a steep growth throughout the year. A request was made for Councillor Martin Goss, Portfolio Holder for Waste, Environment and Transportation, to attend when the Scrutiny Panel next examined Council performance against key indicator targets.

The Panel discussed the significant shortening of times taken to process housing benefit claims [K1B1] from an 11-day monthly average at the start of 2020-21 down to a monthly average of two days. This made a great difference to service users and had garnered awards for the Council. A Panel member noted the pride in service delivery taken by officers and argued that members should help officers to continue to improve service delivery.

The Chairman noted that all local authorities would be working in different ways in the future and that the reports provided showed members how the Council had responded to the Covid-19 situation in a multitude of ways. Officers were commended for their work and Cabinet and officers were thanked for the reports which had been provided to the Panel.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Panel:

- a) Has reviewed the performance described in the reports provided and considered whether these demonstrate the ability of the Council and Colchester

Borough Homes to operate effectively and achieve strategic goals.

- b) Has reviewed and confirmed the reporting timetable covering 2020-2021, specifically the dates for setting KPI targets for 2021-2022.
- c) Thanks Cabinet and Officers for the report and information provided.
- d) Will review performance and progress on 2020-2023 Strategic Plan Action Plan following the end of 2020/21

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that:

- a) No new Key Performance Indicator (KPI) targets be set at this time, due to the many uncertainties facing the Council caused by the situation relating to Covid-19.
- b) Existing KPI targets be maintained unchanged, due to the aforementioned uncertainties facing the Council.
- c) Priority be afforded to those KPIs involving the most life-enhancing areas of performance, with regard to residents of the Borough.

289 Work Programme 2020-21

With regard to Councillor Scordis' request for the Panel to scrutinise bus service provision in the Borough, the Chairman gave the view that this would be a good way to look at ways to promote measures from the 'Safer, Greener, Healthier' agenda and 'Active Travel' schemes in Essex. This could also be linked to the work relating to the 'Active Travel' Phase two bid. A request was made for a full explanation to be provided to the Panel as to what the County Council subsidised and where additional investment may be made to further improve these. The Panel agreed that it was important for the Panel to be briefed as to the responsibilities of the organisations, councils and companies involved in bus service provision.

A request was made for a background briefing to be supplied to the Panel to give an overview of the Panel's previous project to scrutinise bus service provision across the Borough, as a document for consideration before this item came to a meeting. Owen Howell, Democratic Services Officer gave assurance that this would be provided.

A Panel member cautioned that the Panel would need to ensure that service operators understood that members were inviting them to participate in a positive exercise to identify problems and potential solutions and ways for the Council to help, rather than in order to level criticism and complaints at them.

Several members voiced approval for the approach of scrutiny by the Panel, followed by potential policy work by the Policy Panel to assist the Council in setting helpful policies relating to bus service operation.

The scheduling of this additional investigation of bus services was discussed. It was noted that the Panel was already due to discuss alternative methods of service provision at its meeting on 16 March, and that these two items could complement

each other. The Panel agreed that the scheduled item on the Council's property asset portfolio should be delayed until the 2021-22 municipal year and replaced with an item on bus service provision.

RESOLVED that the Work Programme for 2020/21 be noted and approved, subject to the following amendments: -

- a) 'Review of the Council's use of its property estate' be put back and rescheduled in the 2021-22 municipal year.
- b) The addition of an item on bus service review to be added to the agenda for the Scrutiny Panel meeting scheduled for 16 March 2021.