

Scrutiny Panel

Tuesday, 15 February 2022

Attendees: Councillor Tina Bourne, Councillor Nigel Chapman, Councillor Mark Cory, Councillor Derek Loveland, Councillor Lorcan Whitehead, Councillor Dennis Willetts, Councillor Barbara Wood
Apologies: Councillor Lyn Barton
Substitutes: Councillor Sam McCarthy (for Councillor Lyn Barton)

334 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2022 be approved as a correct record.

335 Portfolio Holder Briefing from Cllr Darius Laws [Economy, Business and Heritage]

Councillor Laws provided an overview of the main points of work and progress within his portfolio. A ten-year cultural strategy and an economic strategy were soon to be released and would show the direction that Cabinet wanted to take for Colchester. This approach had included the four-year funding agreement for the local arts organisations, giving more certainty and confidence. The strengths of taking a partnership approach to heritage, with Ipswich, were extolled and had led to economies of scales being realised. There were now formal channels to enable corporate sponsorship of heritage assets.

Castle visitor levels had now exceeded pre-Covid levels, and more re-enactments, events and seasonal attractions had been added to the calendar, attracting more visitors to the Town Centre. A gladiatorial exhibition was planned for next year, which aimed to attract the loan of famous artifacts for display. There was an ambition to look to see what could be done to bring the Castle's roof into use in attracting visitors. A long-term capital refurbishment was planned for the Natural History Museum and more signage was planned through the Town Centre. Councillor Laws paid tribute to officers for their work in utilising new tools and increasing online videos and other resources offered.

The Panel were informed that the Portfolio Holder's intention was to reinstate and display the Roman mosaic which had been found under Lion Yard and that investigatory work was being carried out to assess what was present at the Gosbecks Archaeological Park before considering whether a visitor centre could and should be built at the site. Current financial conditions meant that, at present, only a modest centre would have been possible. Partners would be needed to properly fund such a centre and maximise its use. Duncan's Gate is being examined as a potential new access point for Castle Park and as a tourist attraction, including Roman drains and a wartime bunker. Live digs were one possibility mentioned.

The Panel discussed the information provided, thanking officers for all their work, including work done during the pandemic to help run the vaccination centre. The

partnership approach of the Council was praised, including relationship building with local schools. The Portfolio Holder was asked whether there were additional ways to entice school visits to heritage assets to increase in number, and urged to promote any new archaeological finds. The Portfolio Holder explained that he was happy for important finds to tour the UK, as well as being locally displayed, as this would increase the chances of securing the right to display artifacts here from other areas.

An update was requested on the 'Fixing the Link' project [to improve the link between Colchester's main railway station and the Town Centre]. The Panel were informed that mini parks were planned along the link route, providing extra greening. New and replacement signage had also been requested and a display of Jubilee markings were planned for the area's lamp posts. There was also a wish to provide lighting for the Roman wall along Middleborough, alongside plans to repaint the North Station Road bridge over the Colne and restoration of the fountain on Middleborough. The North Essex Parking Partnership had been asked to crack down on parking infractions on Middleborough which were argued to be detracting from the area.

The subject of 'active travel' was discussed and the Portfolio Holder explained that the focus was on East-West links and that a North-South scheme would not soon come to pass. Officers were working to reduce car use and idling, and were pushing alternatives such as the use of cargo e-bikes and other options to reduce pollution and improve health levels.

The Portfolio Holder was asked what he had done to tackle deprivation, whether actions taken were linked to levelling up and improving skills and learning and whether poverty, fuel poverty and health poverty were being addressed. The Portfolio Holder explained that central strands of the Economic Strategy were to increase skill levels in the Borough, work with health partners to address health inequalities, and to increase housing standards and improve the public realm. The Partnership with the Department of Work and Pensions aimed to increase employment levels whilst the Council's Housing Team were taking a holistic approach to helping people. The Council also aimed to improve access to The Arts and outreach work done by local arts organisations, to improve health and wellbeing.

Cabinet wanted to avoid 'electioneering' actions and was looking at longer term works and actions in realistic ways. A key action was to gain an accurate idea of local heritage assets and how best to use them.

The Portfolio Holder was asked whether he considered the Cultural Strategy to be good value for money.

A Panel member pushed for the ABRO [Army Base Repair Organisation] site to be purchased by the Council and requested an update on the site proposed for development by the Alumno Group, between Firstsite and Queen Street. The Panel was informed that a Management Plan was in place for the ABRO site and that the Council had submitted a bid to purchase the land. News on this would become available in the future. Regarding the site proposed for development by Alumno, the Portfolio Holder argued against a gated student development and in favour of it being a public space for all to use. When the current Administration took over leadership of the Council, it had considered some regeneration schemes to be piecemeal and

wanted to use the surrounding area as a chance for a large-scale positive development of the Cultural Quarter.

Details were requested as to how councillors were being involved in planning for this year's Jubilee. The Panel was told that a community pack was to be released and circulated later this month to give advice and options for celebratory activities. Options included tree plantings and memorabilia.

The Portfolio Holder was asked what could be done to change the perception that heritage assets aren't valued as highly as they should be. The Portfolio Holder noted that the Cultural Strategy had been reviewed and views given, and agreed that the Council had to celebrate the Borough's cultural assets and examine how better to use them. This should involve expanding partnership beyond larger non-profit organisations [NPOs] and include smaller organisations and individuals in order to support and encourage creativity and increase commerce and the vibrancy of Colchester. A holistic approach was being used to improve appreciation of heritage assets, including their environs. The public realm would be used to promote and compliment assets, such as around Jumbo and at St. Nicholas Square. Work to utilise and open up Jumbo would increase visits to Colchester.

Questions were asked as to whether any of Cabinet's ideas had had to be changed and as to what changes the Portfolio Holder had driven himself.

Details were requested regarding renovating the Natural History Museum, including on consultations carried out, next steps, and project budget. The Panel were assured that extensive feedback had been received and included suggestions for an annex to be constructed and/or an increased use of the churchyard. Refreshment provision was also suggested. Cabinet were looking at possibilities and how to make a bid for multi-million-pound funding.

A Panel member queried whether it would be possible to partner with local cafes to promote them as possible places for people to work remotely. The change in working practices had been noted and greater options for agile working were being sought, especially for freelancers and small businesses. Ideally options would be available outside the 9am-5pm day, and this would necessitate transport options which could facilitate their use.

Answering questions about whether Town Centre efforts to increase employment could be expanded to rural areas, the Portfolio Holder explained that a town centre hub, run by Community 360, was to be sited in Holy Trinity Church and the Council was keen to expand outreach to other areas, including the use of social media and targeted use of data. Further questions asked whether village hubs could be restored, providing laptop access and IT skills training. The Portfolio Holder gave assurance that IT accessibility was important, and the Council was mindful of digital exclusion issues. More work needed to be done, with partners such as Age Concern, to improve IT skills and help reduce exclusion.

The Panel and Portfolio Holder discussed ways to encourage visitors to rural areas to be respectful of their surroundings. The Council had been proactive in tackling glittering and pushing for behaviour change to better protect destinations of visitors.

Encouragement was the preferred approach, with enforcement a last resort.

Following discussion of the Business Improvement District [BID], the Portfolio Holder emphasised the benefits it had brought to Colchester. The BID would be heeded to identify what it needed and how the Council could help. The level of vacant commercial units was 8% locally, compared to a national level of around 13%. A Panel member argued that the Council needed a closer relationship with the BID, especially when looking for ideas from across the UK. Suggestions included a BID-run tourist hub, or options for the BID to run town centre parking. The Portfolio Holder was asked what he could do to steer and encourage the BID to look at new ideas. The Portfolio Holder gave assurance that he had a good relationship with the BID and worked successfully with the BID on projects such as wayfinding improvements, the new Town Centre 'parklets' and the 'Click It' platform. Footfall needed to be maximised and the Portfolio Holder gave examples of possible events which could be held.

A Panel member described the relationship between learning/training and economic development, asking what was done to monitor and encourage those working on skills provision and working to help economic development. Colchester Institute were said to be reducing their catering courses and, in light of this, the Portfolio Holder was asked how the Council was looking to promote skills resources to meet the demand for skills from local employers. The Portfolio Holder agreed that more work needed to be done in this area in the future and explained that the pandemic had delayed the Council's ability to do so thus far.

The Portfolio Holder concluded his remarks by praising the work done by officers working within his portfolio, including those in licensing and business support who had worked hard during the pandemic on new tasks and to provide assistance.

336 Work Programme 2021-22

Scrutiny Panel emphasised its wish to use the meeting on 22 February 2022 to scrutinise the performance of Arts Organisations receiving Council funding, in relation to the targets and aims detailed in their respective funding agreements.

RESOLVED that the Work Programme for 2021-22 be approved.

337 Town Deal Business Cases

Councillor J. Young (by reason of serving as a member of the Greenstead Board) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7 (5).

A Panel member queried what was expected of the Panel in its consideration of this item, voicing concern that the Panel would not have sufficient time to consider fully the business cases and give a meaningful recommendation that they be approved by Cabinet, or not. It was argued that each could take half a day to review fully, in line with Green Book methodology and guidance. It was suggested that the Panel could give some guidance to Cabinet regarding this and schedule more in-depth scrutiny of the specific business cases on future dates. The Panel agreed to concentrate on the other elements of pre-decision scrutiny listed in the covering report and accept that the 151 Officer and colleagues had carried out the necessary due diligence and evaluation and could give Cabinet assurance on project viability.

Adrian Pritchard, Chief Executive, gave assurance that the business cases provided contained all the detail and assurance needed to show that all business cases had been properly prepared. The 151 Officer could also give assurance regarding the strength and viability of the business cases. The Chief Executive gave a presentation to describe the history of the Town Bid/Deal and the governance structures in place to oversee the projects and use of funds. £19.2m (including £1m of accelerated funding) had been offered to Colchester, with the geographic area of the Town Deal being set out by Government, with no influence being possible from the Council or its partners. Other pots were and would be available for rural areas. The way to partner with communities and partners had been set out to allow partnership working in deciding the content of the Town Bid for funding. The Council was the accountable body for the funding received from Government. The budget was laid out and challenges noted, including increasing costs for major developments. Adjustments had been necessary to meet inflationary effects and keep to the budgets allocated.

Lindsay Barker, Strategic Director of Policy and Place, provided highlights relating to the projects within the business case for the 'Town Centre and Gateways'. This included two accelerated schemes, with Balmerne Gate improvements having already been delivered and phase two of the work being led by Amphora officers. A lease had been secured for Jumbo, from the owner, and the Deal would fund repairs and allow for further funding to be sought. The potential opportunities for using Jumbo were outlined. Elsewhere, work on St. Isaac's Walk would improve accessibility, especially for people with limited mobility, and would provide secure bike storage.

Early action had been taken to mitigate the effects of increasing costs, with recommendations taken to the 'We are Colchester' Board. Quality was important and some changes were taken to the Board for approval. Some allocations remained unchanged where this was part of other projects or wider funding arrangements. A high-level overview was given to explain the changes to budget.

Community 360 was lead partner on delivering a hub in Holy Trinity Church, benefiting from officer expertise provided by the Council. The Council would contribute around a third of the cost to open this hub and fund public realm improvements around the hub.

Plans were detailed for improving physical connectivity, with detailed plans and a strategy already in place. 2.9km of the route from the Town centre to Greenstead and the University was to be upgraded, with plans in place both for a scheme if additional funding is won, and alternatively if extra funding is not won and the scheme has to be split up with some works to be carried out at a later date.

Dan Gascoyne, Chief Operating Officer, introduced and presented the 'Heart of Greenstead' Project, explaining where it linked to other project work. This project accounted for around a third of the overall funding offered and was targeted at tackling inequalities in Greenstead. The area's background was summarised, along with the need for investment. Previous plans were described along with the viability gaps in funding from which they suffered. The £6m funding covered much work, with further funding, around £2m-£3m, highlighted as coming from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

The partners and stakeholders in consultation and delivery were noted and an overview was given of the planned outcomes and aims was given. The options considered were detailed and the expansion of plans to encompass the expected wider business case for an expanded scheme was explained. A refreshed masterplan had been designed in a community-led approach, including an expanded aim for new affordable housing provision. The planned community and wellbeing hub was described, delivering the 'neighbourhood' model and the timeline was given for the project, including information on risks identified and mitigations laid out.

The Chief Executive explained that the Council's 151 Officer had a role to examine the plans to ensure viability, project proportionality (including between the size of business cases and the size/value of the projects themselves). Green Book assessments had been carried out and then the Chief Executive had a duty to achieve sign off for the business cases via the Town Deal Board [We Are Colchester]. Assurance was given to emphasise the senior management role in leading and stewarding each project.

Praise was given to the work of officers and the wide range of partners working on the projects and seeking to leverage further funding. The connectivity of the schemes was also praised, and Panel members recommended that all councillors watch the footage of the presentation given.

Officers were asked whether there was the ability to transfer funding between projects, if necessary, how spending would be monitored, and what would happen in the event of a change in the Council's political administration. It was agreed by the Chief Executive that some flexibility in moving funding around was key to ensure this was used where necessary and the Panel were informed that the Town Centre Deal Board were aware of the possible need for changes to be approved as work progressed.

The Panel discussed when it could conduct a future review of the business cases and queried what post-implementation reviews from past projects had fed into this process. The Chief Executive noted that some previous post-implementation reviews had identified insufficiencies in project management resources and that this learning point had informed the appropriate management of these projects, taking advantage of the funding granted for such management. Previous experience had showed that it was important to use the Green Book methodology and the Council had learned how to carry this out. As the accountable body, the Council had service level agreements with some delivery partners, such as the County Council, and assurances were given regarding oversight of projects and the seeking of funding to further improve the projects where possible. An emphasis was placed on the Government funding provided to pay for the time of expert officers who brought their technical expertise. It was hoped that Government would respond quickly once the projects are put forward in March, and a future review, by the Scrutiny Panel, of project work would be then useful around six months after that point, according to the Strategic Director for Policy and Place. The Chief Operating Officer suggested that the business cases/projects be brought individually for scrutiny, to allow the Panel a chance to examine them in greater depth individually. It was suggested that the Panel could be given a timetable of the project work so that it could assess when best to revisit each project and help officers to lay out a timetable for the Panel to scrutinise each project.

Returning to implementation reviews, a Panel member argued the merit of these in order to assess if each project had achieved its aims, factoring in the cost of such reviews in the long term. It was noted that some of the outcomes listed were not easy to assess regarding their achievement, and a member argued that there was no guarantee provided that sufficient resources had been allocated to allow for a full review. Whilst some outcomes were easy to see, some were harder to judge, *ceteris paribus*, due to changes caused by other variables. It was therefore argued by one member that assessment methods should be built in to the business cases.

Pam Donnelly, Strategic Director of Customer and Relationships, addresses points made. The Strategic Director acknowledged the importance of efficient connectivity between projects and agreed that embedding of the outcome evaluation process was a necessity, giving assurance that Matthew Brown, Economic Regeneration Manager, was already working on this. Work was planned to pool data with partners to show impacts and trends, and there would be reliance on community engagement, especially on the 'Heart of Greenstead' project. The Chief Operating Officer highlighted that the management case contained detailed information on the monitoring and metrics relating to objectives. The Economic Regeneration Manager explained the content and project management work done to set out outcome monitoring. Some was mandatory, where partners or Government required specific monitoring to be carried out, in some cases in order to ensure necessary funding be provided for five years of project work. The University was a partner and the project work drew upon their expertise, along with an officer who possessed a specific background in research.

Officers were also asked how overlaps between the integrated projects were minimized and how the additional workload on senior officers would be managed, on top of their usual duties, and overloads avoided. It was explained that key skills had been embedded in teams across the Council since fundamental service reviews had been carried out, including high-level project management capacity. Collaborative and flexible working arrangements were in place, with resourcing to avoid officer overload, with support provided by partners such as Community 360. Work was spread throughout the management team, with specialist help bought in to provide specific skills where needed.

A discussion on how to use experience and knowledge gained was held, including on seeking and using funding for projects in rural areas. Efforts to seek rural funding were to be carried out with partners such as the Parish Council Forum to identify where funding could be sought.

A Panel member outlined the Council's work with the County Council [ECC] on youth service provision, against a background of diminishing revenue funding and the County Council's narrow statutory duty for service provision. It was queried what provision there was for providing wider services, resources, and facilities. The Strategic Director of Customer and Relationships explained that the work proposed was to upgrade existing facilities and resources, examples being refurbishment and provision of IT equipment. Glenn Crickmore, Youth Service Lead at ECC, informed the Panel that services were still being provided and that Colchester was lucky to still possess many operating voluntary groups, with some new groups being set up and

funding being won where possible. A Panel member asked the extent to which the Wilson Marriage Centre would be open for use by the public and whether it would be linked to those pursuing a new learning shop. It was explained that the part of the Centre receiving funding could be accessed separately to the main site and that project partners were keen to ensure it was open for public access, with a café and other facilities. The site was somewhat hidden, so work was planned to promote and signpost it. The Strategic Director of Policy and Place pledged to report back on any links between the Wilson Marriage work and other Adult Learning providers.

The Strategic Director of Customer and Relationships explained the importance of the central location of the Town House youth facility. A minimum of five extra youth service volunteer roles were to be created and there was the potential for these to be focused on rural outreach work. Engagement had been carried out and would continue throughout the project. Part of the emphasis was on working with communities to open and support youth groups across rural areas and training would be provided to those who wished to become new youth workers.

A discussion was held on increasing costs/inflation, and officers were asked if Government could be asked to cover inflationary increases in project costs. The Council had asked this of Government, but no response had been received as yet. Assurances were requested that the Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer were confident in the deliverability and risk mitigations of the projects. An update was also requested as to whether it was still expected that around £100m in leveraged funding would be obtained. Assurances were given by the Chief Executive who expanded on this to say that the Section 151 officer at ECC also examined the business cases to ensure the required level of assurances were in place. ECC would also monitor delivery, objective achievement and budget keeping, alongside the monitoring done by the Council. The Strategic Director of Policy and Place explained that the greatest risk lay with the Council, especially regarding inflationary costs. Much work had been done to mitigate these risks and the Council's risk exposure had been reduced by cost management. Once Government funding had been unlocked, partners would then be able to apply for the additional leveraged funding needed. The Chief Operating Officer explained that inflation was predicted to rise to 7% and then fall back to 2% after a few years. Agile project management would allow the projects to adjust to meet new circumstances. The 'Heart of Greenstead' project funding also included £2.3m in estate regeneration funding from an additional bid. There was potential to gain further funding and there was a need to cater for asset management of existing Council homes in the area.

Responding to questions regarding cost of work already done by the Council, and ongoing revenue costs, the Economic Regeneration Manager explained that Government funding had been received to meet costs of the early programme, including an up-front payment of £910k which covered the Council's costs. The Chief Operating Officer explained that part of the financial cases given was to ensure sustainability and that revenue costs could be met.

A Panel member asked what engagement had been carried out with Stanway and Highwoods to identify their needs.

The £500k funding for public realm provision at the County Hospital was examined

and it was asked what value would be added by this, above the improvements expected to be provided by the developers. The Strategic Director of Policy and Place explained that the £500k was fixed and that the value added would include making connections to the history and past communities of the site, with areas open to the public, not just residents.

The role of the 'We are Colchester'/Town Deal Board was outlined. The creation of the Board had been a condition set by Government for receiving funding and the Board would continue to monitor delivery and outcomes, bringing partners' expertise to project delivery and oversight.

A Panel member emphasised the need for people and communities to be actively engaged in the projects. It was argued that more volunteers should be sought, with training and encouragement to seek people to help run services whilst increasing their skills. The Strategic Director of Customer and Relationships outlined the changes experienced by the local supply of volunteers during the pandemic, and the work of Community 360 and the University to research volunteer work, patterns and pressures. The volunteer market was therefore well understood. It was suggested that the Scrutiny Panel might wish to look at how these projects could be used to make the most of volunteers in working within communities.

RESOLVED that a timetable be brought to Scrutiny Panel as soon as possible, and at the Panel's meeting on 7 June 2022 at the latest, to set out a recommended timetable for future scrutiny of each Town Deal project by the Panel, with projects being brought to Scrutiny Panel grouped thematically.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that: -

- (a) Cabinet urges all Group Leaders to encourage their group members to watch the presentation on the Town Deal Business Cases, as given at this meeting
- (b) Cabinet gives attention and provides assurance to show that officers and Cabinet have carried out due diligence and sufficient work to ensure the viability of each business case, prior to their approval
- (c) Community buy-in be fostered as fully as possible, such as by encouraging volunteering by members of affected communities, where possible, to assist in the delivery of Town Deal projects.
- (d) Cabinet notes the view of Scrutiny Panel that the Town House should be seen as for use by all young people in the Borough, not just members of specific groups, clubs or societies, and that open access to youth services and adult learning opportunities be a commitment of the Council

