

Policy Panel

Wednesday, 01 March 2023

Attendees: Councillor Phil Coleman, Councillor John Jowers, Councillor Jocelyn Law, Councillor Chris Pearson, Councillor Rhys Smithson
Apologies: Councillor Kevin Bentley, Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell
Substitutes: Councillor Jackie Maclean (for Councillor Kevin Bentley), Councillor Sam McCarthy (for Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell)

68 Have Your Say! (Hybrid Council meetings)

Mr Steve Kelly addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) to ask how the Council's current policies were being used to improve sustainability in health levels and ask why vitamin D was not being proactively distributed. Mr Kelly alleged that there were people injured by vaccines and who were being ignored and gave his view that a certain medication might help them. Mr Kelly praised the views of Andrew Wakefield [UK academic who was struck off the medical register in 2010]. Mr Kelly argued that the Council should be supportive of more initiatives and more constructive, especially regarding supporting immune systems.

The Chair emphasised that the Council was not a primary healthcare authority and stated his own view regarding vaccinations, which was shared by most doctors and differed from Mr Kelly's view.

69 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes from the meeting held on 30 November 2022 and 11 January 2023 be confirmed as accurate records.

70 City Status Update

Lucie Breadman, Strategic Director, gave a presentation on City Status and the Year of Celebration. A range of activities were planned and described, as well as a range of events to be run by the Council and others. Partners had been invited to participate in Council-run activities and events, and to hold their own across the area, including outside the city itself. The branding being used was displayed, and this formed part of the work with the Business Improvement District [BID] to promote Colchester's retail vision and recognition. City status was to be used to help market Colchester, including videos and methods to hit a range of demographics. Retail and the night-time economy were included in marketing efforts. It was confirmed that 'Enlightenment' would return to the Castle.

The bridge between work on the Year of Celebration and on setting a legacy was described, focussing on the Strategic Plan and Economic Strategy, which were both almost ready for approval, alongside the Cultural Strategy unveiled in 2022.

Matthew Brown, Economic Regeneration Manager, explained that the Town Deal and Levelling Up funding totalled around £40m. Most funding was for the City centre, but £6m was allocated for the Heart of Greenstead project and £3m for a cycle link to that area. These were in their early stages and were expected to complete by March 2026. There was an emphasis on heritage for both funding sources. Extensive progress had been made on Jumbo. Led by the Essex Heritage Trust. Around £1.6m was allocated to refurbish and repurpose Jumbo to become part of the local economy.

Town Deal funding and £1.4m Lottery funding had been put towards creating a new community hub in Holy Trinity Church, the oldest building standing, Colchester's largest Saxon remains. The Church and its grounds would be accessible for public use. Levelling Up funding granted had an emphasis on heritage and improving access to it, totalling around £19.66m. This included improvements to the St Botolph's area (such as the southern Roman wall, the Priory and route from the railway station to the city centre, including better signage). An improved walking route was planned between Colchester Town Station and Firstsite, with steps and ramps at Britannia Car Park and at the Roman wall, to compliment the regeneration in the area. Better signage and access were proposed for the Roman Circus.

Councillor David King, Leader of the Council, expressed his hope that the presentation showed the tangible improvements proposed, including ways to help people use different travel options, including walking. The Council, Essex County Council [ECC] and partners worked together as one team to deliver improvements as part of an overall masterplan. The Council was providing officer time to the project for Jumbo and could offer financial capital, with £1.6m already secured, to give it the best prospects. The Leader stressed that much of the action and planning had cross-party support. The aim was to draw on others to see what more could be done, including university networks and other new cities' experiences. The vision extended to all parts of the City, including Northern Gateway, University, Stanway and Tollgate, and the rural parts of the Colchester area.

Councillor Pam Cox, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage, outlined the aim to open up the East side of Colchester, improving access to cultural attractions. The work to build networks and seek extra investment was described. The Portfolio Holder acknowledged concerns as to whether enough was being done outside of the City for the 'Year of Celebration' and gave examples of activities and events, such as guided walks across the area, including Gosbecks Archaeological Park. The City Charter had been digitised for public access and 'Ride London' was now due to come to the area, drawing visitors.

Panel members praised and welcomed the plans to improve presentation and access to heritage assets in the City. The importance of the area's military heritage was underlined, including historic garrison buildings. The engineering history of Colchester was also emphasised. Much money was provided by the Paxman family towards the building of the Town Hall, but artifacts relating to the engineering history of the Paxmans firm were currently being stored outside of the area and were not on display. This led to a welcoming of giving credit and praise to local firms which contributed to investing in the betterment of the area.

Panel members requested that more information be made public regarding

prioritisation of works and timescales set. A Panel member urged for the River Colne to be better used.

The Portfolio Holder was asked how aspirations would be measured and how these could translate into improving the way in which people and residents viewed the area. Recent consultation had garnered some responses which showed that it was sometimes difficult for residents to feel local pride. More detail was requested regarding promoting a compassionate city, as to how people feel and contribute to society. Young people were identified as being key, with the view given that the Council should want young people not to move away from the area. The Portfolio Holder explained that benchmarking of data was needed, and that an officer had been recruited to lead on youth involvement and collate data to shape future actions.

The Panel identified a range of key attractions, including the Zoo, University, football club, galleries, sports facilities museums, concerts, Priory and beaches.

Concern was raised that inflation meant that costs would quickly rise. The Portfolio Holder was asked what would be done to mitigate rising costs. Lucie Breadman, Strategic Director, explained that she was leading a capital review of financing, seeking to mitigate increased costs. The Council had what was needed, as Levelling Up funding bids included projected cost increases. A Panel member asked if revenue from Britannia car park would decrease if part of it was to be developed to ease passage from the railway station to City centre.

The Portfolio Holder was asked if fringe events could be held in town and parish halls and if events covering the whole area were considered, such as Colchester in Bloom. It was suggested that parish councils should be included, to identify sites of interest and opportunities. Blue Plaques could be included across the greater Colchester area. A suggestion was made to tie all of the different Christmas Fairs together, and for a Wilkin and Sons 'Colchester Jam' to be produced. Lucie Breadman, Strategic Director, stated that she chaired a forum for parish clerks, where updates and information were circulated regularly. The Strategic Director agreed that the Council needed to engage more with rural communities. A Panel member argued for the creation of a rural engagement strategy and appointment of a Councillor as a Rural Champion.

A Panel member requested that the spelling of 'Layer Marney' be correct in the plans and presentations. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that Layer Marney Tower was a partner in the Year of Celebration and was using the official branding. Talks were ongoing with the Zoo and Wilkin and Sons would be welcomed to be part of the celebrations. The Strategic Director confirmed that the Zoo and Wilkin and Sons had been invited to join the marketing group for the Year of Celebration.

The Leader wanted a free-flowing ongoing conversation to continue to shape actions and priorities. The Council did not have the resources to pursue all plans at the same time and the Leader agreed that a sequence of works was needed. The river had been discussed previously, but it had not been possible to take it further at that time. Better use of the river would be taken into new conversations.

The Leader argued that quality of life was key, and the Council should focus on influencing this. Colchester should be an aspirational city of the future, with a

collective sense of place and way of measuring quality of life.

The Town Hall was discussed, and the Leader recognised the struggle to maintain the building, due to funding cuts enacted on local authorities. Major refurbishment and maintenance issues existed, and attempts were being renewed to improve its condition.

Simon Blaxill, Chair of the 'We are Colchester' Board, praised the work of Council officers to obtain the funding that had been won, giving the opportunity for action. The marketing efforts would link together events and activities across the area and the Chair of the 'We are Colchester' Board argued that private business investment was needed to get more investment in the area, and attract incoming new businesses. A Business Improvement District [BID] meeting had shown the difficulties in local recruitment, and one suggestion was for the holding of local employment fairs.

71 Grounds maintenance transition

Nick Christo, Parks, Countryside & Greening Operations Manager, provided an update on the three-year extension to the existing contract, set in place to give the Council time to move to an in-house model. Positive steps had been made to rewild areas and end the use of glyphosate weedkillers. The restructured teams were explained, in preparation for the commencing of in-house operations. There would be a new management, with new 'Maintenance Technician' positions, to give more responsive repairs, more quickly and at a more cost-effective rate. The in-house Tree Team would be more proactive, building resilience and removing the need for contractors.

The current contractors continued to be monitored and engaged with. The Council did not seek to replace them 'like for like', but to set up the service to match new needs and requirements for works.

Panel members underlined the importance of green spaces to health and wellbeing, and the importance of making best use of such spaces. A Panel member posited that the reorganisation of roles would increase operational buy in, and asked for more information on the expected savings from changing the maintenance roles and the commercial offer from the Tree Team.

A Panel member noted that there had been an element of disconnect between councillors reporting issues and then receiving reports back on progress. The officers were asked whether any progress had been made on the new 'Responder' application. The Operations Manager explained that the application was now named 'Task Smart' and was partially live, with full functionality to come. Report processes would flow to operatives, direct work and then ensure reports went directly back to councillors. The Panel were informed of the Council's work with Community 360 to make better use of the potential for green spaces to improve residents' health and wellbeing.

The Operations Manager explained how the Maintenance Technicians would enable reactive responses to issues and a reduction in the use of contractors. The Tree Team

would have a modest income target, in addition to dealing with the Council's tree stock more effectively. Tree care would be more proactive, rather than reactive. When residents called regarding private property, the Council planned to trail the operation of a workable chargeable service.

A Panel member noted that idVerde, the current service provider, had done a good job, but also spoke positively about the past in-house service operated by the Council and asked why trees could not be planted along the High Street and for the Council to consider how it might need to maintain open spaces at Middlewick, should the site be developed in the future. Officers were also asked whether electric vehicles would be used by the in-house service and where the fleet would be housed.

The Operations Manager took questions on priorities and confirmed that key aims were still to reduce costs and increase flexibility. A Panel member suggested that an apprenticeship route should be incorporated in the service, and that parish council maintenance officers could be employed to do some works. The Operations Manager explained that the Council needed to be smart in allocating work and resources, so worked with town councils, parish councils and other partners for site management and maintenance. Others would not be asked to take on Council duties, but could help increase what the Council could do. An apprenticeship scheme had been factored into the planning, including the Maintenance Technician roles, and increasing in size over time. It was projected that there would be around a 25% uplift in service provision, based on the current contract.

A Panel member noted that Spring Lane was now being farmed, with rent coming to the Council and the land maintained by the farmer. This was a large space and would be difficult for the Council to enforce against antisocial behaviour which might occur there. The Operations Officer gave assurances that officers engaged with the site managers, via the stewardship agreement in place.

The Leader gave his support to apprenticeship, being a core tenet of the Council to encourage apprenticeships. The Leader highlighted the difficulty in getting approval from Essex Highways, but said that the Council was on the case. There was an arrangement with Essex Highways to plant trees on St Nicholas Square, as part of a plan for parklets to break up and improve the street scene.

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Support for Small Businesses in & around Colchester

Karen Turnbull, Economic Strategy Specialist, introduced the report, which showed small businesses facing more challenges now than ever before. Many major challenges included Brexit, war in Ukraine, Covid restrictions, increased taxes and increased costs. Colbea and the Business Improvement District [BID] were a key part of the Council's partnership working, with priceless links and knowledge. The Economic Strategy Specialist described work with the SELEP [South East Local Enterprise Partnership] Growth Hub and the Federation of Small Businesses. Colbea support for startups included workspaces at two locations and encouraged churn, as companies increased in success, moved on and were replaced with new start up companies.

Six local authorities had joined together to pool discretionary funds regarding Covid and the Economic Strategy Specialist highlighted successful Colchester bids.

Colchester's 'Ultra Ready' website was used to focus on inward investment opportunities and to help existing local businesses to find additional support. Some of the local engagement events and groups were described, and the Economic Strategy Specialist highlighted the statistics regarding interventions by Colbea. The Council was also working with the University of Essex's Innovation Centre, with the University investing £12m and working to help support and connect technology companies.

Councillor Adam Fox, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Local Economy and Transformation, described the support being provided by the Council and its partners. His time spent on the North Essex Economic Board had shown that Colchester did more than some other local authorities, and positive effects could be seen from this.

The Panel discussed the need to attract new businesses and investment to the area, as well as some of the challenges which made this more difficult. Problems mentioned including past difficulties in getting planning permissions, and traffic management. A Panel member urged for the City to focus on the creation of support service jobs and not impede employers, which could take advantage of good links to London, airports and the coastal ports. Another Panel member welcomed the use of co-working spaces, stating that revenue increased, on average, by around 10% for small businesses which utilised co-working and offering his experience to help those operating in such a way. A suggestion was made that the Council should do more with the military to help veterans start new careers or work for local firms. The Leader confirmed that he was the Council's Armed Forces Champion, and that he liaised regularly with the Garrison Commander.

The Economic Strategy Specialist was asked whether Colchester had a better success rate for small businesses than its neighbouring areas, and whether there were any statistics regarding the types of businesses being set up, and further examples of outcomes from the support given. It was agreed that more data could be provided by the Specialist following the meeting. The Economic Strategy Specialist emphasised the value of the Langham Lodge Park facility and the investment into it, helping start-up businesses to succeed. At the University, students were 'hot-housed' in Studio X, and a business innovation facility was used to help students to progress. Veterans were encouraged to seek support from Colbea for any business start up ideas. There were no statistics relating to comparisons with neighbouring areas, but information could be given on the types of businesses being started locally.