

SCRUTINY PANEL

9 November 2021

Present: -

Councillor Cory (Chair)
Councillor Barton, Councillor Bourne, Councillor
Chapman, Councillor Loveland, Councillor
Whitehead, Councillor Willetts, Councillor Wood

Substitutions: -

Also present: -

Councillor Dundas

316. Welcome and Announcements

A Panel member queried the lack of progress on forming a sub-group, in line with Cabinet's approval of Scrutiny Panel's recommendation, and requested an update. A further query was made regarding the minutes from the previous Scrutiny Panel meeting not being ready for approval at this meeting. The Chairman confirmed that the Panel could proceed in forming the sub-group without needing to wait for the minutes to be approved. Lead group members should agree the arrangements and then the meetings could be scheduled with officer support. The Chairman would work with Owen Howell, Democratic Services Officer, to find potential dates.

317. Portfolio holder briefing from Councillor Dundas, Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Leader of the Council

Councillor Dundas, Leader of the Council, attended and gave an overview of his portfolio and the current main areas of work within it. It was noted that many projects and topics fell within the portfolios of other Cabinet members, and that they would be able to provide greater detail when they appeared before the Scrutiny Panel to give their own briefings.

The Leader explained that partnership working continued to be important and continued much as under the previous Administration. One new partnership was the Refugee Taskforce, one of the schemes under which Colchester had received refugees. This was a partnership with Essex County Council and Chelmsford City Council. Work was also underway to strengthen the Council's relationship with Essex University, which was deemed a necessity if the Council was to achieve its goals regarding master-planning, transport improvements and town centre regeneration. Similarly, the Cabinet wished to improve the Council's relationships with Tendring and Braintree District Councils.

A change in approach from the previous Administration was noted by the Leader, in that, regarding commercial opportunities for Colchester Commercial Holdings Ltd

[CCHL], reports had tended to include 'assumed' profits. The Leader explained his preference for only including these once the income had been confirmed. The intention to look further at the relationship between the Council and CAHL was explained, including arrangements around tax liabilities and how the Council measured its successes. Regarding Colchester Amphora Housing [CAH], the Leader outlined his view that a long-term view needed to be taken in order to ensure that the company had a future. It currently only dealt with the development of Council land, so Cabinet needed to lay out a view as to what it would be doing in the longer term.

Regarding leisure service provision, the Leader argued that the increase in housing around the Borough should lead the Council to expand the services that it provided. This would form part of the Council's work to address the current infrastructure deficit.

The appointment process for a new Chief Executive of the Council continued and there would be a Full Council meeting for all members to participate and decide whether to approve the recommended candidate.

The Leader outlined progress made on the Garden Community project for the Colchester/Tendring border area. It was envisioned that the current liaison group would be superseded by a formal Joint Committee. Members' views on this and levels of support would be sought prior to the next Cabinet meeting. If a decent level of support could not be shown, then Cabinet would withdraw the proposal for a Joint Committee.

Cabinet was encouraging work to look at new opportunities and ways to modernise, including ways to maximise use of social media channels.

Member development continued to be a priority, with the Member Development Group having met the week prior to this meeting. Cross-party support seemed to exist for more informal, collegial, interactions, with more briefings and training on Council duties. The Leader was of the view that there had been too much secrecy around Council plans in the past and his aim was to increase transparency.

The Leader told Scrutiny Panel that he supported the broad themes of the previous Administration's Strategic Plan, so he proposed no great changes to them, but was looking at drawing together the next Strategic Plan, due to start in 2024.

Regarding environmental and sustainability works, the Leader emphasised that he had tasked his Cabinet colleagues to keep up improvements within their portfolios, to better the Council's environmental performance.

Digital connectivity was improving in the Town centre, but it was necessary to ensure that improvements reached out across the area of the Borough. In the same vein, Cabinet had asked officers to draw up a bid for the next round of levelling up funding.

The Council's financial position remained challenging. Whilst the aim was to maintain quality and breadth of service provision, there were financial constraints on what would be possible.

The Panel discussed the information given by the Leader, with one member welcoming the commitment to continue to welcome refugees, in partnership with the County Council and Chelmsford City Council. The Leader explained that the Council had been more involved in this than many other local authorities and was working to secure properties from the Ministry of Defence. Technical issues were being addressed to facilitate this. The Home Office had led on welcoming refugees but the Council had answered their call to participate and support this work.

It was noted that few councillors gained the opportunity to be portfolio holders or Group Leaders, and fewer still to be Leader of the Council. It was queried whether the Council could do more to prepare its councillors for leadership roles, strengthening skills and abilities. The Leader directed the Panel's attention to information that was published on Council performance and activities, which would provide the necessary background for members going into leadership roles, but agreed that it was perhaps necessary in general to work to increase understanding for councillors as to how the Council operated. The Leader further agreed that more needed to be done to increase understanding of the work done by Cabinet, and that succession planning and training should be strengthened.

One Panel member gave the view that Cabinet had been invisible, with little information in local media on Cabinet's work over past months and asked whether this had been intentional. The Leader gave assurance that this had not been intentional and that he was encouraging his portfolio holders to increase their visibility. He argued that it was a steep learning curve for a newly formed administration and for Cabinet members to quickly get to grips with their new portfolios. This work had progressed well and Cabinet was working to liaise with the political groups to increase their visibility. There were good capital project stories to tell, with more communications to be sent out in 2022.

Regarding talk of strategic planning for housing and infrastructure, the Leader was asked for an update as to what had been discussed regarding this. The Leader highlighted the development opportunities at Vineyard Gate and Britannia Mews, with the potential for one or both to be opened up to be available for development. This could include a mix of housing and transport infrastructure; the Council was looking to work with the County Council on this, tying in with their regeneration plans. The Leader was asked to also keep in mind the issues affecting Colchester Borough Homes [CBH], which included reductions in stock and their own financial pressures.

A Panel member argued that the best way to improve relationships between councillors was for councillors to meet informally before and between meetings. The Leader suggested that options for arranging informal get-togethers could be explored and discussed with the Member Development Group and with Group Leaders. He

remained in favour of such opportunities being arranged, if members were in favour of contributing to cover any costs incurred in providing them.

The Leader's intention to ensure that rural areas shared in digital and transport infrastructure improvements was welcomed. One Panel member suggested that the Council should work with parish councils, as well as neighbouring local authorities in Essex and South Suffolk. The Leader agreed that work with parish councils was important but cautioned that most government funding pots focussed on urban centres. This made it more challenging, but Cabinet recognised the importance of levelling up rural areas. The Council maintained relationships with Suffolk local authorities, albeit not to the same level as its relationships with fellow local authorities in North Essex, due to the two areas being covered by different first-tier local authorities [Essex and Suffolk County Councils].

A Panel member raised the asset review which had been commenced by the last Administration, which had included the tennis courts on Eudo Road. An update on this was requested. The Leader explained that this needed to be examined to stop it from losing money. There was potentially Lawn Tennis Association money available to improve the site and make it commercially viable. Cabinet's intention was to maintain the site as a tennis centre and make it profitable. The Leader was asked whether it was absolutely necessary for the tennis courts to produce a profit or if they were worthy of being maintained for the public good. The Leader agreed that there was not an absolute need for all leisure services to match the profit generated by private sector provision, but that the aim was that income should at least cover costs. This would address the need to ensure that the Council could maintain a long-term investment fund for use in keeping assets in good condition. Leisure income had struggled since the start of the pandemic and was yet to fully recover.

The Leader was asked to detail any changes being proposed for the Council's Strategic Plan, and whether this would include any new ideas for member development. The Leader reiterated that he had supported and voted for the current Strategic Plan when it had been brought to Full Council for approval. He continued to support its aims and was open to looking at new ways to achieve them. One example was to look at whether Council activities should be done on a more commercial basis, and ways to better promote heritage and attractions. The Leader expressed his commitment to working with the Colchester Business Improvement District and the targets set for affordable housing. There may be changes possible as to carrying out the Local Plan. Infrastructure had been a challenge for some time and Cabinet was committed to identifying what was necessary and pursuing ways to provide it.

The Leader was asked how the 'five-a-side' meetings with the County Council and Essex Highways were proceeding and what work was being conducted to provide green infrastructure and reduce pollution in hotspots. The Leader confirmed that this remained a valuable forum and that there was much discussion of active travel schemes. Work continued upon cycle routes and their financing. The intention was

for all travel plans to complement each other, including plans for Colchester's Rapid Transit System and the possibility of a new transport interchange. The 'five-a-side' meetings were useful as a way for the Council to put its views and aims to the County Council. The Leader was asked to prioritise pushing for better and cheaper bus services for the Borough.

The Leader highlighted the amount of work which had been inherited from the previous Administration, and the intention not to automatically cancel all of it. It was expected that a new Cabinet would take some time to put their stamp upon the Council. This was especially true given the need to continue to deal with and mitigate the problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It was planned that a vision document would be produced and circulated in Spring 2022.

The Leader was asked to provide detail as to how he expected to carry out his expressed views regarding wanting to slow the rate of house building and cut what he perceived to be Council waste. A Panel member requested more detail as to what this waste was and how it could be reduced. The Leader committed to a target of an average of 920 new residential properties each year. If Full Council approved Section Two of the Local Plan, the Leader was minded to look at reviewing the numbers of housing numbers early in the life of the new Local Plan, and at a number of proposed new developments with the intention of seeking ways to challenge them. Regarding Council waste, the Leader explained that he had identified certain areas over the years and was concerned regarding the Council's commercial operations and whether they would provide the projected income. Cabinet was working with officers to increase efficiency whilst maintaining quality. Individual Cabinet members would be able to give examples from within their portfolios.

The Leader was asked to push Cabinet colleagues to provide answers to outstanding questions from councillors. The Leader gave assurance that he would follow up on these and ask for confirmation from officers that responses had been sent where required.

The Leader was asked whether there had been any news regarding Alumno and development of the land adjacent to FirstSite. The Leader explained that commercially sensitive discussions were being held, and that he therefore was not able to comment on this.

A Panel member questioned the Council's green credentials, arguing that these seemed not to be strong at this time. The example was given of procurement of diesel trucks in the previous year. The Leader was asked what his strategy was for green issues and how he ensured that Portfolio Holders improved green performance. It was explained that all Portfolio Holders were asked for monthly reports on improvements made relating to environmental sustainability. The Portfolio Holders would be able to provide information on these for their individual remits, with an example being that Councillor Crow, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, would be able to outline the work carried out to install electric vehicle

[EV] charge points and plans for EVs to be used for waste collection. The Council was striving to meet its zero-carbon target.

A Panel member complained that, whilst there seemed to be strong action in some areas, it appeared that there was a lack of strategy and leadership in other areas, such as in dealing with rural deprivation. It was asked whether it should be in the Leader's remit to ensure that a joined-up strategy be in place over all planning. The Leader addressed the comments made, and discussed the nature of rural deprivation, its causes and effects. Rural transport had always been problematic, due to the cost compared to its usage.

Answering questions regarding the Town Centre, the Leader explained that Cabinet was looking to develop a Town Centre Master Plan for the future. Use of town centres had changed rapidly over recent years, and discussions were ongoing as to its purpose. The Town Centre was doing well and recovering quickly, following the pandemic. There were a few large units vacant, but not many vacancies overall.

The Chairman thanked The Leader of the Council for attending and taking part in the meeting.

318. Work Programme 2021-22

It was noted that Councillor Crow, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, would appear before the Scrutiny Panel on 15 March 2022.

The Chairman recommended that the Panel move its examination of KPI setting for CBH to be done, in future years, at the same time as the CBH annual review. For 2021-22, these could be moved to be considered in March, when the Panel will be briefed by Councillor Ellis, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning.

The Chairman noted that the agenda for the meeting on 15 March 2022 was very heavy, recommending that this meeting should be used to scrutinise the work of the One Colchester Partnership and Councillor Crow, Portfolio Holder for Environment. The examination of the Arts Organisations who receive Council funding, and the briefing by Councillor Ellis, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning, could be moved to an additional meeting. The Chairman cautioned that the Panel would need to be clear regarding what it wanted to scrutinise regarding the Arts Organisations, such as their plans for future spending now that they have been given guaranteed four-years of funding from the Council. A Panel member argued that it would be hard to scrutinise the work and performance of those organisations without first examining the relevant service-level agreements, and therefore requested that these be provided to the Panel before that meeting. An area of interest was to scrutinise what the Arts Organisations were doing to increase the ability of vulnerable groups to utilise their facilities and offerings, and how the success of any measures could be measured.

It was likewise emphasised that the Panel needed to be clear as to how and what they wished to scrutinise when examining the work of the One Colchester Partnership, especially given the closer working of the Partnership with clinical commissioning groups on health work. A Panel member requested that the Panel be able to examine how the Partnership worked to improve health outcomes for local people, especially those living in deprivation.

RESOLVED that: -

- a) The work programme has been noted and approved for 2021-22;
- b) The Chairman work with Pam Donnelly, Strategic Director of Customer and Relations, to set the parameters for scrutiny of the One Colchester Partnership
- c) Democratic Services find a suitable date for an additional meeting of the Scrutiny Panel in February or March 2022 for the Panel to scrutinise the portfolio of Councillor Ellis, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning, and the performance and future plans of the three Arts Organisations in receipt of Council funding.