

# Environment and Sustainability Panel

**17 September 2020**

**Present:** Councillor Nigel Chapman  
Councillor Peter Chillingworth  
Councillor Mark Cory  
Councillor Mark Goacher  
Councillor Sam McCarthy  
Councillor Lee Scordis  
Councillor Lorcan Whitehead

**Substitutes:** Councillor Paul Dundas for Councillor Robert Davidson

## **1. Appointment of Chairman**

*RESOLVED* (UNANIMOUSLY) that Councillor Cory be elected Chairman for the forthcoming Municipal Year.

## **2. Appointment of Deputy Chairman**

*RESOLVED* (UNANIMOUSLY) that Councillor Chillingworth be elected Deputy Chairman for the forthcoming Municipal Year.

## **3. Introduction to the work of the Panel and Terms of Reference**

Councillor Cory introduced the item and explained that the Panel had been set up to continue the work of a Task and Finish Group. He explained the Environment and Sustainability Panel explored methods of conservation of natural habitats and biodiversity through adapting existing practices or creating new ecologically diverse environments. The Panel encouraged renewable energy generation and carbon footprint reduction in both the public and private sectors by examining air and water quality, plastic and waste reduction and renewable energy generation. The Panel monitored the progress and implementation of the Council's Emergency Climate Action Plan and regularly reported to Cabinet and Full Council.

Councillor Cory explained that he had been looking at the Panel's Terms of Reference with Officers, and had made some amendments to the Terms of Reference originally agreed by Council, with the aim of making the work of the Panel more collaborative with the public and partners across the community, both within and outside the Colchester district.

The Panel carefully considered the proposed amended Terms of Reference, adding in Parish Councils as a strategic partner following a request from Councillor Chapman. Councillor Chillingworth was keen to demonstrate what the Council had achieved to the communities of Colchester from an early stage, and wanted the communities to understand that the Council was trying to set an example of best practice on environmental issues. He felt that the environmental agenda needed to be promoted to communities and felt that the work of the Panel and the Council needed to be made public, and he questioned whether the wording of the third paragraph of the proposed Terms of Reference allowed for this. Although it was

explained that the Council's work on the Climate Emergency Action Plan had been promoted via social media, Councillor Chillingworth made the point that not everyone used social media to access new stories, and it was agreed that paragraph three of the proposed Terms of Reference be amended to include the word 'communicate'.

Following further debate, it was agreed that the wording of paragraph six of the proposed Terms of Reference be amended to include reference to the promotion of the work of the Council, and that the exact wording would be left to be determined by Councillor Cory and Rory Doyle, Assistant Director – Environment.

RESOLVED: that the agreed changes be made to the proposed Terms of Reference subject to the further amendment of paragraph six, and that Cabinet be asked to ratify these.

#### **4. Climate Emergency – One Year On**

Rory Doyle, Assistance Director – Environment attended to present the report and assist the Panel with their enquiries. He advised the Panel that there would be a new Climate Emergency Manager joining the Council in September to drive the environmental agenda forward assisted by supporting Officers. Rory provided an update to the Panel on the work that had been done in respect of the Climate Emergency Action Plan following the climate emergency declaration which was made by the Council in July 2019, and the agreement of the Action Plan in January 2020. The Panel heard that this action plan was intended as a first draft document, and it was expected that it would change as circumstances did and it would be continually amended and detail added to as time went on. This detail would include specific objectives and identified areas that required investment and additional resources to allow the success of the Council to be measured to ensure that the plan was on track over the next ten years. It was the intention of Officers to bring regular updates on the progress of the Climate Emergency Action Plan to this Panel.

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer addressed the Panel to provide a detailed update and highlight some key achievements on projects that had a strong link to environmental sustainability over the past year. One of these achievements was the recognition by Friends of the Earth of Colchester Borough Council and Colchester Borough as a whole as being the joint top climate friendly area in the East of England. Additionally, in January 2020 it was confirmed by the Carbon Trust that the Council had achieved its goal of a forty percent reduction in carbon emissions relative to the levels in 2008.

The Panel heard that the Northern Gateway Heat Network was an innovative project which provided access to low carbon heat to the Northern Gateway Development, the construction of which had begun in 2020, and which would power six hundred and fifty homes and 500,000 feet of commercial space via ground source heat pumps. Further work was being carried out by Amphora Energy who were leading on the project for the Council into the feasibility of extending the heat network even further, increasing its benefit.

The Role of the Authority as a Planning Authority was highlighted as being of importance in tackling the climate emergency in terms of ensuring that emergency efficient standards were met, and how developments were set up and located to promote use of public transport and the protection of biodiversity and green spaces. An example of this was given in terms of the new sports park that was being developed and which would be furnished with electric vehicle charge points. The Planning Team at the Council was creating a Climate Emergency Checklist to give to prospective developers containing recommendations that can be included in development to make them more environmentally sustainable.

As part of the 'Clean Air for Colchester' campaign a survey was conducted at the start of the year to determine residents knowledge of air quality and investigate what measures it was thought would assist in changing behaviours. It was suggested that reminders by the side of the road to remind residents to turn off their engines when stationary could be very effective, and as a result of this planning for some signage had been applied for in areas with the poorest air quality and it was hoped that signage would be rolled out in the near future.

The Panel heard that funding had been obtained from the Energy Saving Trust to purchase twenty five electric cargo bikes this year together with five electric trailers which would be used instead of cars or vans to deliver goods. Ten local businesses would be provided with cargo bikes, and some would also be used by the Council and available to loan to businesses to test out from October this year when the bikes became available. Emily Harrop, Project Officer (Transport and Sustainability) explained that there were a variety of different cargo bikes selected by individual business champions to meet their individual needs, and a variety of bikes would be used by Colchester Borough Council. Anyone using one of the bikes had to be trained, and Essex County Council had provided this training for a reduced fee of £10 to encourage as many people as possible to take this up.

Ben Plummer advised the Panel that as part of the Council's approach to embedding environmental sustainability in its working culture, any new project had to consider its environmental impact and take mitigating steps accordingly. New staff were also being made aware of the Council's climate emergency declaration and Action Plan when they started work to show how important the plan was to the Council.

The Panel received an update on the Woodland Project, which aimed to plant 200,000 trees by the year 2024, and in the first year had planted 4,486 trees with a further 11,200 due to be planted in the second year. The project would ensure that there was a focus on increasing tree cover and protecting biodiversity.

An overview was given of the Carbon Trust Report which contained further analysis on Council emissions and demonstrated that Council emissions were set to reduce to 2,780 tonnes of carbon by 2030. The report provided further insight into the Council's indirect emissions which stemmed largely from housing stock and procured goods and services. Future planning would be undertaken to reduce these emissions wherever possible, and it was anticipated that strategies in the future would look at reducing the Council's carbon output at a greater rate than had been predicted.

The Panel heard that environmental sustainability was threaded through the whole of the Council's Covid-19 recovery plan, and where environmental issues could be considered in the delivery of projects they would be. An example of more sustainable working was the surge in working from home which reduced emissions from travel, and additionally the delivery of Community Hub services online as opposed to from the library where they had previously been based. Further work was planned with Essex County Council to make travelling even easier for walkers and cyclists in the borough.

In response to questions from Councillor Scordis, Councillor Cory explained that he had regular meetings with Essex County Council and other Councillors and Officers and encouraging cycling and walking was a key element of the Colchester Transport Strategy which was currently being developed with the County Council and was in draft form. He confirmed that staff were being encouraged to work as flexibly as possible, although where this was difficult, or collaboration was required, work space would be made available. Ben Plummer confirmed that even in areas where there had not yet been an identified need for the no idling signage, there would still be marshals going around the town centre identifying

people who might be idling and trying to change that behaviour. The Panel heard that of key importance to encourage great walking and cycling was not only to make use of new infrastructure, but to change people's behaviours, and this was being built into a number of upcoming projects around health and wellbeing with Officers seeking external funding to support this work. Councillor Scordis made a recommendation that Colchester Civic Society be consulted with in relation to the 'no idling' signage being put up to ensure that they were on board with the scheme.

The Panel discussed the importance of planning policy in shaping future sustainability, and the need to put pressure on developers to provide environmentally friendly developments. They supported the rise in home working and the ecological benefits that it brings, although concern was raised that increased isolation may be an issue for some people. Councillor Chillingworth suggested that work areas could be provided where people could hire desks on an ad hoc temporary basis to go to work from with colleagues or to provide respite from the home environment. Councillor Cory confirmed that use of alternative Council sites for this purpose had been discussed, and confirmed that he would discuss the matter with the Portfolio Holder for the Local Plan to see if this could be included.

Cllr Goacher expressed his support for the anti-idling project, which he considered an excellent first step towards reducing vehicle emissions, and enquired about the status of the proposed marshals, and what powers of enforcement they would have. He highlighted the need for change in this area with regard to busses idling, which he considered to be a problem that was probably beyond the scope of the marshals and would need the intervention of the bus companies themselves. Councillor Goacher echoed the comments of other Panel Members with regard to the need for the planning regime to take a more ecological approach, and he enquired what steps would be taken to reduce emissions from Leisure World.

In response, Councillor Cory explained that two years ago some funding had been obtained from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to enable the retrofitting of approximately ten busses to make them much more ecologically friendly, and the continued greening of bus stock was something that he would support very strongly. He confirmed that Leisure World had been targeted having been identified as a key polluter and had received a new boiler and insulation to reduce emissions, but much work was still required at the site, including the possible re-building of some of it. Ben Plummer advised the Panel that part of the upcoming work that was being undertaken with the Carbon Trust was centred on Leisure World improvements as part of the development of the Carbon Management Plan. Emily Harrop explained that the anti-idling marshals were all volunteers from the local community who were passionate about reducing idling in vehicles, and who would just be raising awareness and encouraging people to change their behaviour – they would not have any powers or enforcement role in this regard. The approach that was being adopted was concerned with behaviour change and education rather than penalizing people. She confirmed that prior to the current pandemic, there had been a lot of dialogue with the bus companies, some of whom already had anti-idling policies in place, and this would be picked up again prior to the launch of the project.

Cllr Whitehead requested more information on the retrofitting of housing stock and work that had been carried out with regard to sustainable procurement, and he enquired whether the Woodland Project was on track to deliver the promised number of trees. He voiced his support for the continuing of remote Council meetings as this greatly reduced the number of journeys that needed to be undertaken to meetings and consequently the pollution associated with this travel.

Councillor Cory confirmed that extra funding had been provided to the One Hundred Homes Project to enable retrofitting of these properties, and that retrofitting and refurbishment was planned for all of Colchester Borough Council's sheltered accommodation in the borough. Rory Doyle commented that one of the key areas that the Panel would look at in the future was the Carbon Management Plan, and key elements of this would be looking at the feasibility of improvements that needed to be made to Council property, together with the approach taken to procurement. The energy efficiency of Council stock was already being considered as part of the Asset Management Plan and funds would be made available to support this goal. It was confirmed that the Woodland Plan was on track, and larger areas were now being examined, for planting, together with consideration being given to the broader biodiversity impact of the project.

Councillor Chapman asked whether the procurement hub that Colchester Borough Council was a member of with other Local Authorities was also following the same standards in terms of seeking ecologically friendly deals, and he further mentioned that although people in rural communities may be fewer in number, he was aware of a number of his constituents who wished to cycle into town but were wary about the roads. He wondered whether this was something that Essex County Council should be working towards, as well as more secure cycle parking in the town itself. He pointed out that engine idling was also a key issue in rural areas where parents took their children from the towns to village schools and idling of vehicles was a big problem that also needed to be addressed.

Councillor Cory shared the concerns expressed around rural access to town via fully connected routes, and suggested that a recommendation should be made that informed both the Transport policy and Essex County Council Highways.

Rory Doyle addressed the issue of idling around schools and made the Panel aware of a project that was being delivered via the Northeast Essex Parking Partnership which was concerned with working with school communities and promoting safety outside schools in terms of keeping vehicles away and safer parking, and the no idling work would feed into this.

Ben Plummer confirmed that in terms of procurement, Colchester Borough Council was working with a company called the Social Value Portal which allowed for the measurement of how much social value each contractor would bring to a project. Some of the measurable values would be environmental in their nature, for example how many electric vehicles were used by that contractor, allowing greener choices to be made.

Councillor Cory suggested that a number of recommendations could be made by the panel to Portfolio Holders via Officers that when the Council was seeking procurement beyond the Borough, that these same standards would be applied.

Councillor McCarthy expressed his thanks to Officers, and enquired whether the 10,000 trees given out each year under the Trees for Years Project counted towards the total for the Woodland Project, and it was confirmed that they did count towards this total.

Councillor Cory noted that the Panel had suggested a number of recommendations to Portfolio Holders, including Councillor Julie Young around planning and the Local Plan, Councillor King in relation to procurement, and Essex County Council and the bus companies.

**RESOLVED** that the contents of the report be noted.

## **5. Greening Colchester Policy glyphosate**

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager – Neighbourhood Services, attended to present the report and assist the Panel with their enquiries. The Panel heard that in November 2019, Colchester Borough Council had committed to ending the use of glyphosate weed killer following a recommendation from the Conservation and Environmental Sustainability Task and Finish Group. This would be via a phased reduction of the use of glyphosate on the Council's own land and working with external partners to set out a clear example of best practice and demonstrate how the use of glyphosate weed killer could be reduced. The Panel heard that the use of glyphosate had already been reduced and that by March 2021, the use of glyphosate in general use would have been completely phased out. The removal of glyphosate was not straightforward as there was no direct replacement, but Officers had been looking at all the different options available and were considering a variety of different replacements. As part of the Greening Colchester Policy methods of continuing to support biodiversity had been considered alongside working towards the removal of glyphosate, which included considering areas around the Borough where grass cutting could be stopped, and areas which could be naturalised by allowing them to re-wild.

Councillor Chillingworth voiced his support of the policy and although he felt that it was extremely important to take advantage of the reduction in the use of glyphosates to support biodiversity and allow some areas to grow wild, he emphasised the need to keep communities up to date with what was happening so that they understood the reasons behind the decision. Rosa Tanfield confirmed that the new approach of allowing plants, weeds and trees to grow in a natural way did go against the traditional approach of green area management, and she reassured the Panel that communities would be kept updated through engagement, communications and campaigns. She said that a number of approaches would be adopted to set out clearly what the objectives were, including engaging with schools, community advocates, Parish Councils, Ward Councillors and social media outlets.

Councillor Scordis expressed his pleasant surprise that the reduction of glyphosate had already started, as he had noticed no increase in the number of weeds in the parks, and Officers were commended for their work. He asked Ward Councillors be consulted and advised when it was intended to allow areas to re-wild in their wards, so that they could engage with their community representatives to ensure that residents were aware what was happening. Rosa confirmed that the areas that had been proposed for re-wilding were identified in the draft policy, and that Officers would be speaking with Councillors affected.

In response to a question from Councillor Goacher, David Carter, Parks Contracts and Volunteering Specialist, confirmed that Colchester Borough Council did have regular dialogue with other Authorities over the reduction of the use of glyphosates, some of whom had already started this programme of work, and some of whom were considering doing this. Colchester Borough Council was a member of the Parks East group which is the regional parks forum and information and learning was being shared across this forum with the intention to help others. He commented that the planned phased reduction in the use of glyphosate allowed the Council to identify the best different ways to control unwanted vegetation and encourage community engagement in areas where it was planned to stop weed spraying and re-wild areas.

Councillor Whitehead expressed his opinion that the Council should be as ambitious as possible when considering the re-wilding of areas, and should leave as much biodiversity as possible. He considered it was key to this project that publicity would be required, and communities educated as to what future green spaces would look like, how the ground would be maintained, and what was acceptable in the future. He also enquired whether staff were aware of the potential health impacts of the use of glyphosates. Rosa explained that the work administering the glyphosates was undertaken by contractors who had a lot of input into the proposed policy, and who undertook all work in line with appropriate risk assessments, training and health assessments. David Carter confirmed that glyphosate was still licensed for use and was safe to use as long as there had been the correct training and the correct protective equipment was used as well.

Councillor Chapman enquired whether there had been any contact with Essex County Council to request that they not mow their verges in the rural areas?

Councillor Cory confirmed that he had raised this issue with colleagues at County Council as Colchester Borough Council was contracted to mow a number of verges in the Borough. There was an agreement in principle with Essex County Council to look at some of the verges that they owned to reconsider the mowing regime to see if there was scope to reduce mowing of these to support the re-wilding of areas if this could be done in a safe manner to maintain visibility.

*RESOLVED* that the following recommendations be made to Cabinet:

- (a) RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that it approve the phasing out of the use of glyphosate based chemicals (herbicides) in grounds maintenance operations on CBC owned land and trial alternative methods of weed control as set out in this report and appendices.
- (b) RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that it approve a change in grass cutting frequency on selected grass verges and areas of open space to be managed as areas to encouraged wildflower or naturalisation as set out in this report and appendices.
- (c) RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that it delegate authority to the Assistant Director for Environment to make minor changes to the Greening Colchester Policy should it be necessary. Any changes considered by the Assistant Director for Environment to be significant will be reported back to the Environment and Sustainability Panel

## **6. Work Programme**

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

Councillor Scordis reminded the Panel that North Station Road was a conservation area and that Essex County Council were already working on this area as part of their safer, greener work and he wondered whether there was any work that could be undertaken in relation to this area? Councillor Cory confirmed that this was something that was already being examined, and discussions had already taken place as part of the 'Fixing the Link' project. A future update on the progression of this project was requested.

Cllr Chillingworth commented that the pre-existing Task and Finish Group had worked with outside organisations, and suggested that some time may be set aside at future meetings to invite outside groups to attend the Panel to engage with them.

Councillor Whitehead agreed that it was useful to have this engagement and wondered whether it would be possible to use the voice of the Council to lobby other organisations on issues the Panel had discussed. Councillor Cory suggested that he would meet with the Group Spokespersons to discuss agenda items and when the Panel considered reports, recommendations on agenda items could then be made to Cabinet.

Rory Doyle confirmed that community engagement was one of the earliest things that it was proposed that the Panel would consider in the work programme, and he confirmed that the preceding Task and Finish Group had been concerned with ensuring that engagement with different groups and the general population was as effective as possible. Rory commented that it may be possible to meet with key groups outside the meetings, but that access to the public meetings of the Panel was available to all, when there would be the opportunity to feed into the business that was being discussed.

*RESOLVED* that the contents of the work programme be noted, and that consideration be given to setting up a sub-group of the Committee to consider agenda items and potential meetings with external groups.