

Policy and Public Initiatives Panel

Wednesday, 17 June 2020

Attendees: Councillor Christopher Arnold, Councillor Phil Coleman, Councillor John Jowers, Councillor Derek Loveland, Councillor Sam McCarthy, Councillor Martyn Warnes
Apologies: Councillor Lee Scordis
Substitutes: Councillor Lorcan Whitehead (for Councillor Lee Scordis)

54 Appointment of Chairman

RESOLVED that Councillor Sam McCarthy be appointed Chairman for the ensuing Municipal Year.

55 Appointment of Deputy Chairman

RESOLVED that Councillor Martyn Warnes be appointed Deputy Chairman for the ensuing Municipal Year.

56 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 4 March 2020 be confirmed as a correct record.

57 Public Initiatives

[Councillor Phil Coleman joined the meeting during this item].

The following suggested initiative had been received from Ms Maggie Woolley:

‘As has been done at The Hythe, providing information boards to tell people about the history of the area, are they possible throughout the town area? I particularly think that Middle Mill should be brought back to life, so people know about its position, importance to the town and its history.’

Members discussed the initiative, noting that the Heritage and Tourism Task and Finish Group had concluded its work and been dissolved. Councillor Cory, Leader of the Council, praised the idea and noted that provision of additional boards had been discussed. Recently, however, the effect of Covid-19 on the Council’s finances would necessitate a scaling back of the Council’s plans. The Panel were informed that they could make suggestions to Councillor Julie Young, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Culture and Performance, or make formal recommendations on this to Cabinet.

Members of the Panel stressed the importance of advertising, signposting and explaining heritage assets across the Borough, in rural as well as urban situations. The visitor signage provided on Mersea Island was given as an example where signage was well-used by visitors, at a low cost to the Council. Members agreed that sites like Middle Mill would benefit from similar signs.

The Leader gave a summary of the work being done by the 'Beautiful Borough' campaign to promote the highlights of Colchester Borough and agreed that the efforts must be Borough-wide. It was urged that any recommendations should look to fit additional signage into existing plans for promotion of the Borough.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that approval be given for the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel to explore the possible provision of additional information boards at heritage assets and sites of interest to visitors across the entire area of Colchester Borough.

58 Review of actions from Panel recommendations in 2019/20

Councillor Scott-Boutell attended and, with the permission of the Chairman, addressed the Panel to welcome the review of the Panel's work from the preceding municipal year, and highlight the important benefits of partnership working.

Councillor Scott-Boutell welcomed continued Council support for dog events but also advocated the Council holding dog socialisation walks and events. This would make it easier for owners to identify problems and advice on how to rectify them.

An update on the multi-agency approach to enforcing Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) was requested. Clarification was asked for as to whether enforcement patrols were only in operation for the Rugby Club PSPO, or across the Borough-wide PSPO. The need for partnership work and a shared policy or strategy for responsible dog ownership was stressed by Councillor Scott-Boutell. The Panel noted that the Rugby Club PSPO would need to be extended until the Club moves, and the view expressed that the Borough-wide PSPO regarding dog walking and fouling would need to be better advertised and enforced, so that enforcement could focus on the minority who transgressed the Order. Mandy Jones, Assistant Director for Place and Client Services, agreed to check on the enforcement operations for the PSPOs.

Officers were asked to confirm whether a response had been received to Cabinet's letter regarding cycleway preferences to Councillor Kevin Bentley, Cabinet Member for Infrastructure at Essex County Council.

Cllr Scott-Boutell further noted the current lack of support for Youth Zones by the County Council and asked for answers as to why the County Council was not supportive. Councillor Jowers informed the Panel that he had asked members of the County Council's Cabinet about the Youth Zone. He had been told that existing Youth Zones were in financial difficulties, leading to the County Council's current unwillingness to support a new Zone in Colchester. Councillor Mark Cory, Leader of the Council, thanked Councillor Jowers for raising this at County level and noted that the financial difficulties had only been caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, however the business model was sound. Some central government funding had been provided to Youth Zones and the need to support young people still remained. The Panel noted the impact that a Youth Zone would have on the Council's revenue budget, especially given that this was a project for a service that was not in the responsibility of the Council.

Questions were asked regarding the Vision document for the River Colne and when this would return to the Panel for consideration. It was explained that the Vision was not yet drafted and was not ready to be considered. The project brief was within the meeting agenda, as this had been drafted prior to the disruption caused by Covid-19. Some members expressed concern that the project brief lacked ambition and requested clarity as to whether the brief covered only the Colne River or the whole Colne Valley, whether Braintree District Council and other potential partners (such as parish councils and the Local Enterprise Partnership) had been approached to participate. The opinion was given that wider partnerships are needed with different organisations in order to capture points from and for different demographics. Panel members noted that there were still officers and elected members within the Council who had been involved with the original Colne Partnership and it was queried whether those individuals could meet with the appointed consultants to explore what could be improved or added to the Vision. Officers confirmed that the Colne Vision brief would be reassessed in light of any changes to the Strategic Plan Action Plan, so further amendments and improvements were possible. An offer was made to work with local councillors and communities on this. One member posited that the River Vision project could potentially leverage additional funding and that options should be explored to attempt to make it self-funding.

It was stressed that making improvements to the Colne Valley would be well supported and would assist in efforts to recover from the effects of the Covid-19 situation. One Panel Member requested that the Vision talk of conservation and enhancement of the Valley, rather than just protection. It was queried whether the project briefing was finalised or could be amended. Mandy Jones, Assistant Director for Place and Client Services, explained that the critical issue is that much of the work coming from the Panel's recommendations, such as the Colne Vision Document, was currently on hold until the full financial effects of the Covid-19 crisis and the necessary changes to the Strategic Plan Action Plan could be identified.

Regarding the cycle storage provisions, the Panel were informed that a preferred supplier had now been chosen.

A request was made that a commitment be made to proceed with project work as and when possible, especially given the positive effects expected from them. Councillor Cory, Leader of the Council, agreed and gave assurance that the recovery plans would look to take forward these projects if it were possible and if they further the new strategic priorities. It may become necessary to focus on a smaller number of the projects which would be of greatest benefit to the Borough.

A Panel member asked why recommendations made by the Panel in March had not been included in this report. It was explained that these had yet to be considered by Cabinet but would come to Cabinet on 8 July 2020.

The Panel discussed County Council funding put into works in Colchester Borough. It was noted that differentiation should be made between funding on the County Council's statutory responsibilities and its spending on non-statutory projects.

RESOLVED that the Panel noted the actions reported.

Approach to Council and Panel's work programme 2020-21

Mandy Jones, Assistant Director for Place and Client Services, set out the current work programme and outlined the agile approach proposed for adding to the programme, mindful of the effects of the Covid-19 situation and the changing strategic priorities. The four cells of the recovery programme were outlined, and it was explained that these were being developed by senior managers and the administration. The Panel would have a role to play in considering new policies, examining the results from current and recent surveys and picking out potential items for follow up or adoption. Should the Panel agree, insights from recent and current consultations would be brought to the Panel meeting on 5 August 2020 for consideration. The Panel would then look to make recommendations on these to Cabinet.

In response to questions as to which committee/s would be looking at options for the North Essex Garden Communities (NEGC) Project, it was explained that this had been, and would be, looked at by Scrutiny Panel and was discussed in leadership meetings with group leaders, who should provide updates to their group members. It would be discussed by the Local Plan Committee and NEGC would be coming to Full Council for discussion in July, where options for the future would be considered, including potential ways to wind up NEGC Ltd.

The Panel discussed a request to add a consideration of 'ongoing opportunities for alternative models of service delivery', as noted in Cabinet minute 443 from 11 March 2020. Following discussion of the appropriate way in which to address this request, it was clarified that the correct way to proceed would be for the Panel to vote on whether to recommend to Cabinet that this subject be added to the Panel's work programme for later in the year. It was noted that this recommendation could be put to Cabinet prior to the Panel's next meeting and Cabinet could then decide whether to approve this and, if so, to set any terms they deemed appropriate to the Panel's considerations.

A member of the Panel pointed out that the current contract for grounds maintenance was drawing to an end, and that this might be a good example for the Panel to focus upon, should it receive approval from Cabinet.

RESOLVED that the Panel:-

- (a) Noted the contents of the Panel's Work Programme for 2020-2021 as set out in the report and confirmed the appropriate scheduling of work for the next municipal year.
- (b) Approved the approach taken to generating topics for the workplan linked to the current Recovery Plan and ongoing consultations and would consider these at the next meeting of this Panel.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that approval be given for the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel to investigate the potential use of different methods of service delivery, specifically with regard to the provision of the grounds maintenance service.

