

POLICY PANEL

12 January 2022

Attendees: Councillors Chillingworth, Cox, Goacher, Hayter, Jowers, Leatherdale, McCarthy, Pearson and Scott-Boutell.

Substitutes: None.

Also Present: Councillor Dundas, Councillor B. Oxford

35. Minutes of Previous Meeting

Debby Bloomfield addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) to speak concerning the Council's plans for Covid-19 commemorations and the Panel's previous considerations regarding this subject. Mrs Bloomfield explained that she had lost two family members during the pandemic and felt upset and insulted by what was being put in place to honour those who had been lost. Mrs Bloomfield gave the view that the Council had not supported residents during the pandemic and that planting trees as a commemorative act was disrespectful. Mrs Bloomfield complained that the Council had not asked the bereaved what they had wanted and had not listened. Families had not been able to see their relatives and had had to live with loss. More money had been allocated to the Jubilee celebrations than to Covid commemorations.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 November 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

36. Verbal update on Covid-19 Commemoration plans

Andrew Weavers, Monitoring Officer, expressed his sympathy for the loss that Mrs Bloomfield had suffered and then presented the latest update on this subject. The Monitoring Officer explained that the Council was trying to address people's wishes and wanted to help people to commemorate their loss in a sensitive way.

The act of commemoration originally planned to occur in Charter Hall had been rearranged and, in partnership with the Mercury Theatre, Garrison and other partners, would now take place at the Mercury on Saturday 26 March 2022. The Mercury were staging the event for free and their staff were also volunteering on the day. There would be no entry fee charged for those attending. The event would be produced by the Mercury, with faith and community groups, for people to remember their loves, lives and losses during the past 2 years. It would also be livestreamed, and work is underway to see if BBC Essex could cover or stream the event. Community events will also be held during the day to remember and recognise the

work done by key and emergency workers through the past two years. The Monitoring Officer welcomed the views of the Panel on the plans being put in place.

The Panel noted that it had previously voiced concerns regarding plans for tree planting and that the Chairman had written, on the Panel's direction, to explain its displeasure at the situation.

Councillor Dundas, Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Leader of the Council, highlighted that the Panel had made recommendations to Cabinet in September 2021, which Cabinet then approved subject to the removal of the word 'celebration' from those recommendations. The Leader queried whether the wording of the recommendations truly reflected the intended views of the Panel. Regarding the four matters raised by the Panel, all were progressing, and the Leader was happy for the Panel to put forward recommendations now if it wished to do so.

The Leader clarified that the tree planting work being carried out was not related to Covid commemorations but was from the Woodland Trust tree planting budget. This did not stem from a decision taken by Cabinet.

The Leader emphasised the difficulties faced as to when commemoration would be appropriate, and the importance of careful consideration as to timing, given that the pandemic had not yet ended. The Chairman agreed and stressed that communication across the Council was vitally important, including between its committees and the Cabinet.

A Panel member explained that her understanding was that this subject was to have been brought back to the Panel for consideration and for recommendations to be made. The Castle Park planting had been paid for from a Woodland Trust planting budget, but it had been thought by Panel members that this had dovetailed into the provision of a blossom circle for Covid commemoration. The Panel member noted that suggestions had been made, at a previous meeting, that a list of sites for commemoration be rolled out, and expressed dissatisfaction that only a small budget had been provided and only one central site identified. The blossom circle for Kings Head Meadow had already been advertised and was being installed.

It was suggested by one Panel member that funding should be found to allow the roll-out of memorials across the Borough, with consultation of residents carried out and community input, both in parished and non-parished areas. It was argued that communities needed places which residents could easily reach and use for quiet reflection. Concern was raised that people might not want to come to an event at the Mercury, but would prefer to have quiet reflection instead.

The suggestion was made that a consultation should be carried out, potentially on the Council's website, to ask residents across the Borough what they wanted to have happen. This might pick up whether there was a strong wish for there to be commemorative events and sites held and/or installed in wards across the Borough.

It was noted that local ward councillors had not been consulted about the blossom circle being installed at Kings Head Meadow.

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), clarified that the blossom circle was a National Trust initiative, putting an emphasis on contemplation and reflection. The plan for this blossom circle to be installed in Colchester was already in place and going ahead pre-pandemic. This was meant to exemplify blossoming communities and was felt to have a synergy with the community spirit shown during the pandemic. The Assistant Director pointed out that, owing to its size, the scale of a blossom circle limited the number of viable sites where one could be installed.

The Panel were informed that planting had continued across the Borough's wards and that consultation had been carried out with ward councillors and communities. If specific themes were wanted by different communities, it was confirmed that this was something the Council could address.

Panel members agreed that residents' opinions should be sought, as had been previously recommended by the Panel, and that two-way communication was needed for this process. It was queried whether the Panel could again recommend that consultation be carried out, and whether one option would be to seek views via the local newspaper. Views were given that the Council had not done enough and that a bigger, specific, budget should be set for this work, and that it was premature for commemorative activities to go ahead. It was further argued that if commemoration plans could be put back, then more time would be available for consultation and consideration, including of alternative sites for commemoration, such as Trinity Church in Colchester Town Centre.

Councillor John Jowers detailed the personal memorial that his family had arranged to commemorate their lost relatives, with permission gained to plant a memorial tree at Cudmore Grove.

The view was given by a Panel member that members could use their locality budgets to help communities within wards, which could and would find appropriate ways to carry out remembrance in line with local wishes. Another member suggested that more funding should be requested to go to community groups and parish councils to assist with this.

Officers were asked whether the Mercury had sufficient size, scale and ventilation to be an appropriate venue for an event/act of commemoration. One Panel member argued that this event was too early and should not be the 'final' event and requested that the budget and spending plans be re-examined.

The Leader had read the Panel's original recommendations and noted that much of what had been discussed at this latest meeting had not been covered by them. There had been a recommendation made for a community celebration event and, in the Leader's view, that did not seem to be the current view of the Panel. It was suggested to the Panel that significant thought should be given to any commemorative sites. The Leader explained that there were numerous potential sources for funding and that, if the Council ascertained what was wanted, there would be ways to bring those things to pass by working with communities.

The Leader suggested a one-to-one meeting with the Chairman to ensure that recommendations made matched the Policy Panel's intentions. The Chairman thanked the Leader, Mrs Bloomfield and the Monitoring Officer.

The Monitoring Officer emphasised that the Mercury event would be a commemorative event, rather than a memorialisation. The Council had been approached by Hunnabals, on behalf of their clientele amongst the bereaved, who had requested this. The event had been planned based on the wishes of bereaved residents who had not been able to come together at the times of their loss.

37. Update on Platinum Jubilee Activities

Andrew Weavers, Monitoring Officer, presented the update on planned Jubilee activities and community engagement options. The Jubilee bank holiday weekend would commence on Thursday 2 June 2022, and a gun salute would be carried out in Castle Park for the Queen's official birthday. A Jubilee beacon would also be lit at 9:45pm. The Council will support street party organisers by providing community advice packs. Community events would be catalogued to help show what events would be held.

A Panel member requested that the Council expedite circulation of its street party advice packs. The Monitoring Officer was asked why the £50k refurbishment of the Castle Park bandstand had been included within Jubilee preparations. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that this refurbishment had been allocated to ready it for an Army band to play within it for the Jubilee and that quotations for the work had been received which were for less than the £50k total mentioned. The past use of the bandstand was summarised, and its refurbishment welcomed by Panel members, with one member arguing against renaming the band stand and noting that it was an Edwardian construction and had its own history which should be respected.

Views were given by Panel members regarding the need to ensure that events be community-led and not set as Council events. Some examples of planned events were given by the Panel.

The Monitoring officer was asked what the Council would do in the event of Operation London Bridge [the plan for what will happen in the United Kingdom after the death of Queen Elizabeth II] needing to be triggered before the Jubilee.

The Chairman requested that a timeline of planned events and actions be provided for members.

RESOLVED that: -

- (a) The Panel have noted the details in this report and considered the proposed activities.
- (b) The Panel agreed that members should promote Jubilee activities with their own parish councils and/or community groups and encourage community participation.

38. Business case for an in-house grounds maintenance delivery model

Councillor Martin Goss attended and, with the consent of the Chairman, addressed the Panel to raise his concerns about the situation regarding the delivery of grounds maintenance services. Councillor Goss gave the view that there was political will to bring the service in-house, expressing his surprise at the content of the report and its recommendations. Councillor Goss posited that capital costs of providing these services would be easier to meet than the ongoing revenue costs associated with them. Individual problems with the current service provision were raised, including with mowing along the verges of the Via Urbis Romanae and the habit of staff working for the current service provider, idverde, of neglecting to carry out litter-picking before grass was cut, which had generated complaints from residents. Councillor Goss raised concerns regarding the extension of the existing contract as no key performance indicator targets seem to have been set and, whilst retendering the contract would be a lengthy process, idverde's equipment was reaching its end-of-life stage. Councillor Goss argued that bringing the service in-house would give staff pride in it and improve working conditions, terms of employment and better control over work schedules. More multi-skilled operatives could be hired and the service made more adaptive to the needs of local areas. Members were urged to come together and approve the bringing in-house of the grounds maintenance service.

A statement had been provided by Councillor Mark Cory, who gave his apologies for not being able to attend, and, with the consent of the Chairman, was read to the Policy Panel. Councillor Cory described his disappointment that the service was not being recommended for bringing in-house at this time and voiced his hope that Cabinet would build upon the environmental work of the previous administration, which included rewilding, and take forward the Council's environmental ambitions. Councillor Cory gave the view that the proposal to extend the current contract would go against the Council's environmental principles and employment standards. This included not having enough provision to enhance biodiversity. Bringing the service in-house would bolster the Council's work on social value and working conditions, allowing for locally sourced workers and materials. Councillor Cory asked how, given the contract could not be changed, the Council could address these points, ensure that social value is provided, and the environmental and ecological principles of the Council met.

Councillor Beverley Oxford, Portfolio Holder for Communities, agreed that Cabinet wanted to bring grounds maintenance back in-house, but that there was not time to do so before the current contract ended. There was currently insufficient space for vehicles and staff at the Council's sites, and funding needed to be set to address this and buy the necessary vehicles. The extension of the current contract was recommended, so as to allow time to work up viable plans for an in-house service.

The Chairman suggested that a recommendation be made that an annual review of performance be held during this extension, which received the Portfolio Holder's support.

The Portfolio Holder cautioned that care was needed in creating and managing green spaces, and agreed that littering remained an issue with communications continuing to attempt to reduce its scale.

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager (Neighbourhood Services), gave a summary of the work conducted by the Policy Panel on this issue since early 2020. The idverde contract was for 2016 to 2023 and was worth over £10m. The future service delivery options had been examined by the Policy Panel, including in-house, outsourced and mutual models. The four objectives used by the Policy Panel in their deliberations, and detailed in the report for this item, were highlighted.

The method used for creating the business case was explained, including work done to look at different options, with assistance from experts from the Association for Public Service Excellence.

The assumptions made in the business case were explained, such as the expectation that this would be a 'like for like' move of services from outsourced to in-house, with around 50 idverde staff members moving to direct Council employment and that safe and legally compliant operations would be ensured by the creation of a number of new roles focused on this. A review would be carried out after 18 months to evaluate performance and identify any necessary changes.

The Group Manager explained that the 'Community Asset Based' objective aims would not be deliverable from the start of operating a new in-house model, but that these would be pursued once the service had transferred and after the initial phase of in-house operations commencing. Similar was said about the objective for 'Exemplary Management of the Environment.' It was explained that the in-house model would give the Council greater control over budgets, however it would also necessitate a significant investment by the Council at a time when its budget is already under strain. Minimal transformative effects to the service were predicted, due to the 'like-for-like' emulation of the current service provided.

The Group Manager summarised the current facilities and operational situation, risks relating to this and the challenges of providing what would be needed for in-house operations. This included an expected need to manage greater volumes of green waste, in excess of the amount for which the Council is currently licensed and in excess of the capacity of the Shrub End site. The Panel were urged to note the capital and revenue costs associated with mitigating and overcoming these risks and challenges. Commercial gains were expected to be possible from this service in the long term, but would not be initially possible.

It was assumed that operations could be conducted from Council sites and that around 29 vehicles and specialist machinery would be required. The potential to move to using electric vehicles, looking to meet Council plans to transfer to the use of electric vehicles by 2030, was discussed.

The reasoning for the recommendation of a three-year extension to the idverde contract was further explained. The Government had been carrying out consultation on its planned Environment Bill, which would have a direct impact on Neighbourhood Services, especially food waste and recycling collections, expected to come into force around 2023-24. It was expected that there would be a short-term drop in performance and morale when the service transitioned to the in-house model, which was a normal effect of such changes and would be closely managed.

Whilst transferring grounds maintenance to be carried out in-house was achievable, the challenges were summarised. These included an increase in service costs with significant investment and no savings expected, cost implications regarding the operating of a fleet of vehicles, capacity at the Shrub End site needing to be extended, and some of the aims set out for the service not being fully met. The Group Manager explained the ways in which an extension of the existing contract could be used to ease the transition to in-house provision.

The Chairman thanked the Group Manager for her report and reminded the Panel that this session was not confidential and that members should be mindful of this when discussing contractual questions. The Chairman proposed that future examinations of the current grounds maintenance contract should include confidential sections where commercially sensitive questions could be asked and answered.

Initiating the Panel's discussions, a member expressed support for an in-house service, and the greater control it would give to the Council, even if this should mean an increase in the cost of service provision. The view was expressed that there was no time to conduct this transition without an extension of the existing contract and that a three-year extension would allow the necessary time, and members suggested that Policy Panel should receive annual updates on how this was progressing, alongside reviewing performance of idverde in its extended contract. One view given by some Panel members was that the extension should be a rolling set of three one-year contract extensions, rather than a single three-year extension. One member cautioned that three years of extension may not give sufficient time to fully prepare for in-house operations.

A request was made for the recommendation at 2.2 (recommending that officers continue planning for an in-house service) be strengthened to further emphasise the aim to bring the service in-house.

The Panel highlighted that Chelmsford City Council had experienced service improvements through bringing their grounds maintenance back in-house. It was suggested that the Council could engage with Chelmsford City and Tendring District Councils to gain their views and advice. The Group Manager was asked if local service agreements could be made with Essex County Council and Parish Councils, including bidding for County Council contracts in order to gain income from an in-house service.

The Panel discussed the likely effects of the expected Environment Bill, especially upon local authorities which would face challenges from it in the long term.

A Panel member asked what current measures were used to review idverde's performance and what work was being conducted to identify an appropriate site for in-house facilities and officers to be accommodated. Another member noted that the Shrub End site had been operating at maximum capacity for a significant time and asked why a bigger site had not been sought sooner.

Regarding the length of the contract extension and its terms, the Group Manager explained that the contract allowed for an extension of up to three years. The contract included strong mechanisms to allow for the review and discussions of

performance. Key Performance Indicators, rectification notices and joint inspections all formed part of the Council's contract management.

The Panel were informed that the Shrub End site was not currently over capacity, but that more space would be needed if the Council was to accommodate a transfer of 50 staff and 30 vehicles. Finding a new site was one option, and there was a need to look at staffing numbers and fleet size to assess what would be required. Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), explained that the Shrub End site was a waste transfer station and that the expected Environment Bill would have a significant impact on it. Many variables would affect what facilities would be needed. Timing was key, especially as development work would continue around the new Waste Strategy.

One member was concerned at the lack of a reporting function for members who had problems to report. The Group Manager explained that funding had been secured by the ICT Team to develop a system to be used for managing casework and reporting issues. 'Responder Two' would allow an improvement in casework management, address issues and improve the reporting path for residents and elected members. There would be an app for elected members to manage and review reported issues. The Council were looking to advertise the finished system to seek clients amongst other local authorities which might wish to purchase it.

The Panel discussed the need to make recommendations and expedite their consideration by Cabinet. The Panel also expressed a wish to remove the last two words from recommendation 2.2 [the words being 'if agreed'] and the addition of a recommendation for an annual update to come to the Panel to review the grounds maintenance service provision and the progress on preparing to move the service in-house.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that: -

- (a) The contract with the current contractor, idverde, be extended on the same terms. There is provision within the current contract for an extension of 3 years (only) if the Council decides up to 72 months from the commencement date. The last date for extension notice is 1st April 2022;
- (b) Officers should continue with plans for an in-house service meeting the objectives agreed, for commencement at the end of the contract extension agreed in 2.1 above;
- (c) An annual update be provided to the Policy Panel on progress of plans towards bringing the grounds maintenance service in-house, with confidential sections to allow discussion of commercially sensitive matters, where necessary.

39. Work Programme 2021-22

The Panel requested that the meeting scheduled for 2 March 2022 include an update on Covid-19 commemoration plans and activities, and an update on the Council's mitigations on financial inequality.

RESOLVED that the Work Programme be approved, with the addition of an update on Covid-19 commemoration plans and activities, and an update on the Council's mitigations on financial inequality, both to be scheduled for the meeting on 2 March 2022.