

Policy Panel

Wednesday, 02 March 2022

Attendees:
Apologies:
Substitutes:

40 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2022 be confirmed as a correct record.

41 Verbal update on Covid-19 Commemoration plans

Hayley McGrath, Corporate Governance Manager, informed the Panel that she had discussed the Panel's views and expectations with the Leader of the Council and the Chair of the Panel. An update was then provided to the Panel, focusing on work to provide a permanent commemorative site, and options for supporting communities to provide local commemorative sites. The blossom circle near Castle Park, Colchester, had been explored as an option, but it was acknowledged that the Policy Panel had felt that this was not appropriate for a commemorative site.

The Panel were asked to provide formal and specific recommendations to Cabinet to present the Panel's views on the provision of a permanent commemorative site or sites. One option was for the Council to work with local community organisation to support the creation of community-led commemoration sites across the Borough. A second option was for the Council to site and provide a memorial directly in a suitable area, with a proposed site being the Anglican Chapel at Colchester Cemetery. £275k funding had already been secured for renovation and refurbishment of the building and it was proposed that the Council conduct a public consultation to seek views on how to use this site.

A member of the Panel complained that previous suggestions and ideas from the Panel on this subject had been ignored. A contribution from a member of the public, who had addressed a previous meeting of the Panel, had been that there had not been sufficient consultation or outreach to local communities to seek views. The member of the public had not received a written response to her comments, and it was suggested that all members of the public who addressed meetings should receive a written reply, with thanks for speaking. It was explained that this would involve a change to the Council's constitution and would require approval by Full Council. It was suggested that Cabinet should be told that the Panel wished to see more work to see what residents wished to see regarding remembrance site/sites.

The Corporate Governance Manager acknowledged that this was an emotive subject and that it was difficult to consult the public without presenting a framework of options. It was recommended that consultation be on such a framework of options, rather than a consultation open to all suggestions. It was also an option for the Council to support parish councils and community groups to run localised consultations.

Concern was raised by a Panel member that an impression might be given that the Leader of the Council was trying to direct the Policy Panel's deliberations on this subject. Panel members then expressed approval for the suggested use of the Cemetery Chapel as a commemorative site, given the need to refurbish it. It was acknowledged that it would be very hard for the Council to meet everyone's wishes, with some areas not seeing many requests for a local site of remembrance, but enough evidence of public desire for a site in Colchester being seen, with the Chapel as an appropriate location to meet these wishes. A Panel member expressed the point that, whilst the Chapel was a good site, not all those who died during the pandemic were buried at the Cemetery.

The Panel was informed by one member that some parish councils are keen to see local sites of remembrance and were asking why the Council was not leading on this. Officers were asked if there would be Council support and funding for parish councils to conduct consultations and how the Council could help. It was asked if the Council could inexpensively provide a consultation platform on its website, splitting responses into individual geographical areas. It was suggested by a member of the Panel that a recommendation be made to Cabinet for small amounts of funding to be provided to assist local communities who wish to install sites of remembrance. The Panel discussed this, noting the differing levels of interest across different areas, and the varying levels of reserves across different parish councils. It was also noted that councillors could use their locality budgets to help fund local projects and that existing assets should be looked at as options, including Holy Trinity Church and its grounds, in Colchester.

The possible use of Holy Trinity Church for a remembrance site was discussed. Caution was urged by one Panel member, given that the Church dated back to Saxon times, and that the current wilding of the churchyard should be preserved. It was argued that any proposals should be consulted upon with stakeholders such as the Civic Society. Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), explained that Holy Trinity Church's restoration was already part of the Town Deal projects and would see the Church brought back into use. The project to renovate the church and install a community hub was at the business case stage and would be submitted soon and Government approval sought [in May 2022]. Stakeholders had been widely consulted as part of the project work conducted. It was asked by a Panel member if commemorative elements could be incorporated within this project, such as a water feature.

A Panel member urged that there was no need to rush the planning and construction of sites of commemoration, and that the Council should take time to consult properly, take on ideas and cooperate with parish councils and local groups where appropriate.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that: -

- a) Cabinet approves the refurbishment of the Anglican chapel at Colchester Cemetery, including work to make this a site of commemoration for the Covid-19 pandemic
- b) Cabinet considers how residents can be consulted via the Council's website, to

seek views on local commemorative sites

c) Cabinet makes available matched funding for spending from members' locality budgets on commemorations relating to Covid-19

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River Strategy

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), introduced the report, which was centred around the River Colne, and extolled the potential benefits of the Council producing a Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy. The Panel had previously discussed the merit of a strategy for the River Colne and much was now happening, including the future of the Colne and the embedding of waterway management within the Council's planning. A new Green and Blue Strategy would lend itself to further work, potentially by the Policy Panel. The Environment and Sustainability Panel had received updates on the woodland and biodiversity project and a wetland restoration project had been identified as an option to pursue, alongside partners.

The Panel were informed that changes to the leasehold of the River Colne had provided the opportunity for the development of options for fishing rights. A Panel member suggested that the recommendation proposed for this [2.4] be amended to say that this be presented to the Portfolio Holder 'for consideration', rather than 'for agreement.' It was noted by a Panel member that the granting of fishing rights could aid in conservation of the River, creating a group of people who fished and would have an incentive to work to preserve the Colne's ecosystems and press for their preservation.

The report content was praised, and members welcomed the prioritisation of the River Colne within the Council's planning. A member noted that river stewardship was a national issue and expressed support for development of the Colne as an asset, gaining and heeding expert views as to how to proceed to avoid causing issues and harm to biodiversity. Expert views on ecological impacts would be vital.

The Assistant Director was asked if there were any implications regarding sea walls and whether this should be discussed with partner organisations and stakeholders, such as local farmers. Options such as 'managed retreat' were discussed.

A Panel member noted that the report showed environmentally sensitive areas [ESAs] and asked whether these should be removed from the Strategy, as they were no longer in operation. The Assistant Director was also asked whether Ramsar sites were set by the EU, and whether they were on a statutory footing in the UK.

Views were given that the upper Colne [before the River reached Colchester] didn't receive as much attention as the Stour Valley. The old Colne River Project had had an officer dedicated to helping residents to improve wildlife and biodiversity. A Panel member suggested that such a position would be helpful if reintroduced. A member gave the view that the upper and lower Colne should have their own separate approaches and stewardship plans. The lower Colne was clear of large-scale moorings, due to the past prioritisation of commercial traffic to and from Colchester. The Panel suggested that the Strategy would be beneficial, but would need to be

continuously reviewed and updated, which could include a role for the Policy Panel to assist with this.

A Panel member requested more detail regarding changes to the leasehold of the River Colne and details of all lease owners, if there were any not listed in the report. The Assistant Director was also encouraged to make use of the expertise available at the University of Essex and its World-leading experts on the subjects to be covered by the Strategy.

A Panel member noted that three rivers in different parts of the World had been granted legal personhood, thus putting the pollution of those rivers on the same standing as intentionally harming a person. Environmental politics were moving towards more entity rights and stronger legal protections.

The Panel considered whether the strategy might be better named as the 'River and Bodies of Water Strategy.'

The Panel discussed the history of the Colne River, including the holding of harbour inspection tours, which had ceased once the Colne River ceased to be dredged and the harbour decommissioned.

The Panel recommended that the Assistant Director, Environment, take on all the suggestions and views given by the Policy Panel and apply these when the River Strategy/Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy is drafted.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that: -

- a) Work be commenced to develop a new Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy for Colchester and that development of the strategy be incorporated within a Panel work programme for the 2022/23 municipal year. A key element of the strategy development to include consultation with stakeholders.
- b) Options be explored working alongside key partners to identify and lever in external funding to accelerate wetland restoration projects as part of the Woodland and Biodiversity Programme of work.
- c) The Council collaborates with the Land Use and Green Infrastructure Essex Climate Action Commission with a view to the Council being a partner to the proposed Essex Climate Focus Area and that future updates are taken to Environment & Sustainability Panel for consideration.
- d) An options paper on fishing rights for the River Colne be developed with stakeholders and presented to the relevant portfolio holder for consideration.

43 Mitigations which the Council can make regarding loss of Universal Credit uplift and financial inequalities

Leonie Rathbone, Assistant Director (Customer), and Jason Granger, Group Manager – Customer, presented the update on the Council's mitigations, providing developments since the previous report received by Policy Panel. The officers

confirmed that all actions and recommendations from the Panel had been carried out.

The squeeze on residents continued to intensify, with fuel prices steeply rising, pay rates stagnating, post-Christmas debt having to be managed and the end of the uplift in Universal Credit. Inflation was set to rise to 5.8%. Job market changes required needs for reskilling.

The Council's teams working to provide financial and employment support were outlined. Work continued to improve residents' incomes, either by maximising the claiming of benefits to which they were entitled, or by helping residents into work or options for improving and gaining new skills. The Council's holistic approach was described, including ensuring access to food, increasing incomes and reducing debts.

The Group Manager detailed the avenues by which residents could contact the Council and access its support, as well as the services and support from Essex County Council, central government and government agencies. This included webpages and links, phone options and in-person contact options such as at the Greenstead Housing Office and the Community 360 Hub in the centre of Colchester. The Council also partnered with the Job Centre Plus to help residents access jobs, training, and skills. Advice could be sought via the Council's website or by calling 01206 505855.

The Council remained a member of the Local Government Association [LGA] and District Councils' Network [DCN] and could work to influence national policies and approach via those organisations. Other partnership working included with the Department for Work and Pensions, Colchester Borough Homes and Essex County Council [ECC]. ECC funding was described, including the 'Essential Living' Fund aimed at stabilising incomes. The Council continued to work with partners across the voluntary sector.

Newer funding streams were highlighted, how they were used by the Council and its partners, and the residents for which they were designed to help. A £300k discretionary fund had been provided to the Council to assist those identified as needing additional assistance but not eligible for other funding streams, such as those living in HMOs [homes of multiple occupancy] or higher council tax bracket properties. The new Council Tax rebate scheme, to mitigate increased energy prices, was described. The Council would be running a campaign to push for households to move to pay their Council Tax via direct debit, as this would aid quick disbursement of the rebate.

A presentation was given to show highlights of the past year. £415k had been distributed to help maintain tenancies and the household support disbursement was now at £20k, up from £12k.

Wider preventative measures were outlined, including the Anchor Programme, business support (especially during the pandemic) and work via the Town Deal and the levelling up programme. The Council was working with ECC to use £3.8m made available to support those with complex needs or financial vulnerabilities and an example was given of someone helped by the Council and Community 360, to illustrate how the Council worked.

The Panel discussed the options for residents to contact the Council, and a request was made to maintain links provided for winter support options, alongside the other useful links provided by the Council. A Panel member praised the idea of a monthly ward-by-ward mobile drop-in centre for use across the Borough. The Group Manager agreed to retain information for winter support options on the Council's website and informed the Panel that officers were working to identify outreach sites for drop-in events across the Borough.

The Panel praised the Council's work with the local foodbank, including the work done to signpost households to support and benefits for which they were eligible. Guidance had helped people to locate services. The Group Manager explained that efforts to collocate with the Colchester Food Bank had gone slowly, partly as a result of the pandemic. The 'business' cards used to provide contact details for possible sources of support to foodbank users had been redesigned and proved a good way to discreetly provide such information.

The Panel asked for details on the renters' fund, including whether this was a finite pot and whether any of it remained unspent. The Panel were informed that Colchester's allocation of £191k had been given to CBH to administer. This money was for private renters in arrears and the Council had worked with CBH to allocate it to those in need. One month of the scheme remained, with any unspent money being reclaimed by Government at the end of March. A campaign had already been carried out to identify possible recipients.

The Panel discussed the Test and Trace Support Grants. Self-isolation requirements had ended on 24 February. The Group Manager confirmed that all applications were expected to have been assessed by the end of this week, with back-dated claims still able to be submitted for 42 days after a period of isolation had ended.

In response to questions regarding strain on the teams and providing support to officers, the Assistant Director (Customer) informed the Panel that her officers kept management informed of their work levels, and that resources were used flexibly to address instances of high demand on the service. This included the hiring of additional staff on fixed terms to cover spikes in work. Long-term changes in demand on the Council's services would be identified and addressed on a more permanent basis, where required. Any needs for increased resources would be presented and considered.

A Panel member gave the view that numbers of claimants of support funding options seemed to be low, compared to the Borough's population and poverty ratios, and asked for more information on those households which were in need, but which had not been picked up in the figures relating to claimant numbers. The Panel member noted that some individuals would be captured in the figures given for multiple categories. It was asked whether the figures given for foodbank usage showed individuals or households.

Greater information was requested on the breakdown of figures, split into local areas, predicted need, mitigated needs, the Council's outreach strategy and trends in officers' caseloads. The Assistant Director (Customer) and Group Manager will work on a greater level of more detailed information than is currently available for the Panel

members subsequent to the meeting. The Assistant Director (Customer) explained that work on the Outreach Strategy was already underway, as part of works on a different strategy, led by Lucie Breadman, Assistant Director – Communities, and utilised community engagement in its drafting. Part of this was to work with the Council's Communications team to increase awareness of the benefits and funds for which residents could apply.

The Panel were informed of the work going on as part of the emerging neighbourhood model of the Health and Wellbeing Alliance. Partnership working had been strengthened over the past six months and included a working group tasked with helping residents to mitigate fuel poverty. It was explained that it might be possible, in the future, to provide coordinated data from across the partners for consideration by Council committees or panels.

The Assistant Director (Customer) gave information on the wider support network in place in the Borough, in which the Council worked with Community 360, Citizens' Advice, and the Financial Inclusion Team at CBH. It was clarified that the numbers provided to the Policy Panel in this report only related to those residents receiving direct Council support, rather than those receiving support from partner organisations.

The Panel were informed of the work done to provide payments to those in need, from the Emergency Hardship Fund. This fund's purpose was to provide support to those struggling to pay Council Tax. The £18k available for 2021-22 had been fully distributed to eligible applicants.

The Chairman requested that a further update report on the subject of this item be brought back to the Panel for consideration at the Policy Panel meeting scheduled for 23 November 2022.

RESOLVED that: -

- a) Policy Panel has considered, reviewed and commented upon the Council's mitigations to date of financial inequalities
- b) All recommendations of the Policy Panel, from their consideration of this topic held on 24 November 2021, have been carried out
- c) An update on this subject be provided to the Policy Panel at its meeting scheduled for 23 November 2022

Work Programme 2022-23

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment) informed the Panel that updates would be provided to it in 2022-23 on the Council's plans for grounds maintenance provision and on the drafting of a Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy.

The Chairman noted that this meeting was the last meeting for Councillor Peter Chillingworth. The Chairman thanked Councillor Chillingworth, paid tribute to his work and wished him the best for the future.

RESOLVED that the Work Programme be approved, with the addition of: -

- a) An update on Council mitigations of financial inequality, to be provided to the Policy Panel at its meeting scheduled for 23 November 2022
- b) An update on the Council's plans for Grounds Maintenance work, following the end of the current contract, to be scheduled for a Policy Panel meeting in 2022-23
- c) An update on work relating to the proposed Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy, to be scheduled for a Policy Panel meeting in 2022-23