

## **SCRUTINY PANEL**

### **14 February 2023**

*Present:-* Cllr Willetts (Chair), Cllr Laws, Cllr Lilley, Cllr Lissimore, Cllr Scordis

*Substitute Member:-* Cllr Arnold for Cllr Smith

*Also in Attendance:-* Cllr King, Cllr Cox. Cllr McLean

#### **389. Minutes of previous meeting**

The Chairman noted that the Panel had received the requested briefing notes to cover the Northern Gateway project with Turnstone, and additional budget information. It was confirmed that the minutes from the meetings on 13 December 2022, 16 January 2023 and 24 January 2023 were accurate records.

#### **390. Have Your Say**

Mr Alan Short attended and addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1), to request that the Panel now schedule an item for consideration of the arrangements, processes and Cabinet dealings with Alumno, including involvement of Amphora Trading, and the problems encountered. Mr Short had previously requested this at the Panel's meeting on 5 July 2022, and felt that it should now be possible to schedule this item on to the work programme.

The Chairman explained that the Panel had received guidance from Andrew Weavers, Monitoring Officer, following the meeting on 5 July 2022. The situation regarding Alumno was a long-running one, and was still ongoing. The Monitoring Officer had advised that it would not be appropriate for the Scrutiny Panel to consider an item on these matters until all potential legal matters were resolved. The Chairman noted that many of these legal issues had been resolved by a High Court ruling in October 2022, but some potential legal matters still remained between Essex County Council and Alumno. The options for the Panel were to either schedule a confidential consideration of the subject [excluding members of the public from participation or viewing] or to wait until the scrutiny could be carried out in public. The Chairman's preference was for the latter option, to ensure transparency. Councillor King, Leader of the Council, agreed that there was legitimate public interest in the subject, and potential lessons to be learned, with some learning points having already been identified and acted upon, such as to improve the Council's working with Essex County Council.

Mr Short posited that the Scrutiny Panel was meant to look at how the Council could do things better in the future and cautioned that this work should be done before the memory of things faded. The Chairman gave assurance that Mr Short would be updated when progress could be made.

#### **391. Items requested by members of the Panel and other Members**

The Panel were briefed on a request made by Councillor Sunnucks, who had written to Owen Howell, the proper officer for the Panel, to request that the Panel schedule an item for it to consider the 'Northern Gateway strip lease arrangement' at a future meeting. The Chairman expanded on the request to explain that Councillor Sunnucks's view was that there were aspects of the strip leasing arrangements which were of high operational risk. This subject would involve information and discussions relating to matters of high commercial sensitivity and therefore would need to be considered in closed session of the Panel.

Owen Howell, Democratic Services Officer, advised that it would be best to schedule this item for the Panel meeting on 15 March 2023, as the agenda for the meeting on 14 March 2023 was so heavy. The Chairman supported this advice, noting that the 15 March 2023 meeting also had a heavy agenda, noting that this subject had also been discussed at the Panel's previous meeting [on 24 January 2023] and so recommended that a short item be scheduled for 15 March.

*RESOLVED* that the Scrutiny Panel receive a confidential report on the situation regarding the strip leases for Northern Gateway.

### **392. Briefing by the Leader of the Council, Portfolio Holder for Strategy**

Councillor David King, Leader of the Council, briefed the Panel on the approach he had taken to his Portfolio. The Leader explained the team approach, which served the collective purpose, ensured that councillors had a material say on matters, cross-party, addressing issues. The Leader expressed his approach to supporting the team, officers, and councillors. The Leader praised the work of Adrian Pritchard, previous Chief Executive, and of Pam Donnelly, current Chief Executive, who had done much work to bring in funding, increasing the Council's reputation and partnership working with others.

The budget shortfall issues were described within the wider situation, which included supply chain issues. Work was started early to identify the main priorities, working with officers to address immediate situations as well as long term issues such as capital expenditures, Colchester Commercial Holdings Ltd, Colchester Borough Homes.

The Chairman explained that the Panel had already looked at much of the Leader's work on different matters, such as the Budget and partnership working.

The Leader was asked what could be done to bring people back into the local labour market, in the context of it appearing that fewer in the Borough were now working than prior to the pandemic. The Leader talked of the degree to which incentives were sufficient to get people to return to the labour market. Limited action was possible for the Council and for Essex County Council. Connectivity could be improved to make work easier, and would include cheaper travel options. The Council could be a good employer, offering a model of opportunity, as well as working with the voluntary sector to expand options for residents. Opportunities could be pursued to support the Business Improvement District and support employers to invest in increased employment opportunities. The Leader expressed commitment to relationships with key institutions, such as the University of Essex, and to increasing the retention of employment within Colchester.

The Panel discussed statistics relating to the proportion of residents holding a degree or an NVQ [National Vocational Qualification] at level four or higher, and it was noted that the percentage of local people holding these qualifications, at 37%, was slightly lower than the

regional percentage, 39%, and lower than the national average. The Leader gave assurances that the Council was doing what it could, with partners which included Colchester Institute. It was sometimes difficult to identify and influence the flows of young people into higher and further education. The economic development team worked to increase Colchester's 'offer' to potential investors, aiming to increase the local demand for skills. The Council's apprenticeship scheme held an 'Apprenticeship Acknowledgement Ceremony' recently and aimed to set a good example.

When asked whether it was realistic to have a commitment to high and medium earning opportunities, when skills were required, the Leader explained that this commitment marked the importance of this to the Council, which acknowledged the skills gap and now needed to set out how the Council could help to address it. There would be potential opportunities if devolution of powers to the Council occurred. There was not currently enough power locally to set an agenda to improve skill levels, but devolution could improve the Council's ability and funding to improve skill levels and life chances.

A Panel member noted that much cash from central government had been steered by the Council into areas of multiple deprivations, but could not see differences between the indices drawn up in 2015 compared to the more-recent indices from 2019. The Leader was asked what changes he expected the use of funding to enable. The Leader explained that the effects on indices and outcomes lagged after investment, and that investment will make material differences, such as the outcomes planned for the Heart of Greenstead project, including improved health and happiness. Improved surroundings gave opportunities to improve life for residents in the area. A Panel member pointed out that the assessments to lay out the indices for areas of multiple deprivation only allocated a ten percent weighting to quality of life, compared to a twenty two percent weighting for income level, and argued that funding to improve quality of life would have minimal impact on the indices. The Leader described additional positive effects from additional funding, including better access to transport and health options, leading to an improvement in people's outlook and ability to seek a better life, better training and better employment. The Council's role was to work with others to start this chain of improvement and enable residents to improve their lives.

The Leader was asked how confident he was that councillors were currently sufficiently equipped to address local crises and emergencies, as community leaders, and not to exacerbate them. The Leader agreed that improvements could be made, which would involve working with the Council's communications team, citing the recent situation at a local hotel which was accommodating people seeking asylum in the UK. The Leader concurred with Panel members' comments about social media speeding the spread of stories, with a member of the Panel pushing for work to ensure councillors could be confident as to how best they should deal with crisis situation and carry out their communications. The Leader promised to discuss this subject with the Council's communications team.

A Panel member raised the situation in Ipswich, where Suffolk MPs were critical of the Ipswich Town Deal, and compared it with the situation in Colchester where local MPs were supportive of the Town Deal work being carried out here. The Leader was asked what the situation was regarding wider communications with the public, to help explain what project work was underway. It was suggested that signage could be erected at project sites to communicate plans and explain work underway, as well as more marketing elsewhere. The Leader gave assurances that the Council's communications team was working to do this, to advertise current projects and future improvements. Work was also underway to improve and streamline decision making and the Leader explained that the right communications at the right times would be key.

Understanding was voiced by Panel members for the situation regarding tight Council finances, but one suggestion was made that the old signage for Colchester as a town was still in place, including the purple signs on the City's outskirts which did not show the other places with which the City was twinned. Some other places which achieved city status had quickly installed new signage to show this, and one Panel Member voiced their view that it had been a mistake for the Council to take the name 'Colchester City Council', rather than an alternative such as 'City of Colchester Council.' The Leader agreed that there was a debate to be had on these matters, but argued that the most important thing would be to ensure that all signage was well presented, however it was worded, focussing on how it was presented and moving to an approach to ensure that visitors were impressed by it.

The Panel discussed the future of the City centre. The Leader was asked how work was progressing to find new occupants for the retail units which had formerly been home to Debenhams and Marks & Spencer, and to resolve issues experienced at Stane Retail Park [Tollgate] regarding traffic congestion and how to potentially ease this with improving bus links.

The Leader spoke of the vibrancy and footfall which would help the City centre to profit. Talks continued with the Business Improvement District and data from local businesses had been better than expected for the Christmas period. Efforts were being talked of to use city status to attract new brands to the City and to increase occupancy rates for commercial sites, with business leaders acting as ambassadors. An active conversation was ongoing regarding the former Debenhams site, with a less-active conversation being held regarding the former Marks & Spencer site, where the Council had not yet had much influence. It was expected that the project to improve St Nicholas Square would help resolve these issues. The Leader described talks that had been held with the businesses at Stane Park, with the Council's aim being to include them more and to show that the Tollgate area was of equivalent importance to the importance assigned to the City centre. These talks had included looking at better bus connectivity.

The Panel discussed the different centres of activity around the area and the Leader was asked if the Council had a bias towards businesses within the traditional City centre. The Leader explained that the Council was committed to making the most of the development of new centres, including new retail opportunities. The Council was open to investment, wherever it came, and linking up different centres of activity. A Panel member welcomed the success of the City centre at Christmas and that concerns regarding permitted development issues (such as conversion of retail units into residential sites) had not been realised.

The Panel discussed the positives seen in the City centre, including high footfall and the opening of a Rolex shop. The Leader welcomed new outlets such as this, arguing that they were attracted by the change and renewal occurring in Colchester. This drove investment and was a positive influence in creating a 'buzz' about the City.

The Leader was asked how he saw the future, including his views as to potential devolution of powers and what powers he wished to see the Council take up. A Panel member noted that the Council's Administration had said it wanted more control, but had not moved to seek this. The Leader expressed his wish to build upon existing Council operations, alongside fellow council leaders and Essex County Council. Progress was being made with the County Council and, depending on what devolution occurred, more funding could become available for work to improve long term quality of life, alongside greater decision making powers. The Leader argued that residents would benefit from a strengthened local

authority, with greater influence at County level, and that the Council was well-placed to work with the County Council.

A Panel member gave their view that communications within the Council had deteriorated since May [2022], voicing concerns about communications from the Administration to officers and elected members. The Leader was asked what he could do to improve communication, especially regarding decision making and ways to include councillors and residents in this. It was argued that increased pressure on officers should not be allowed to lead to a reduction in consultation. Examples were given to indicate where lack of consultation had occurred, and where local members could have given advice. The Leader offered to discuss the situation with the Chief Executive and to ensure that officers knew the need for consultation to be carried out, and best practice observed with regard to communications. The Leader posited that his Administration had an open-door policy and spent much time talking to elected members of all groups over a wide range of issues, but voiced his readiness to take on suggestions. The Leader believed that the Council did well on larger matters, and he gave an undertaking to examine how better consultation could be employed on smaller-scale decision making, to improve this and make the process smarter.

Another member of the Panel raised additional concerns over poor communication relating to the Hythe Task Force, with no action seeming to be taken or meetings held, and no information being given to councillors. The Leader apologised for the lack of communications and promised to address this.

The Chairman thanked the Leader of the Council for his briefing and the answers and views given to the Panel.

### **393. Briefing by the Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage**

Councillor Pam Cox, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage, briefed the Panel on work ongoing within her portfolio and paid tribute to her predecessor in the role, Councillor Laws, for passing on a well-managed portfolio. City status was a significant bonus, upon which the Council was keen to capitalise. The current Cultural Strategy had been signed off in the previous March and the Portfolio Holder explained that she saw it as her job to realise that strategy. The content of the Strategy was outlined, drawing on a range of other strategies. Work continued on Town Deal projects, the City Centre Masterplan, use of levelling up funding such as for the St Botolph's area, and planning for the legacy of gaining city status.

Organisations within Arts Council England's National Portfolio were reporting as being in good shape, including The Mercury and Firstsite. Increased funding was being obtained, however they were still experiencing the effects of increased prices and were aiming to increase visitor and audience numbers. Examples were given of actions taken to increase visitors and audience numbers. The Portfolio Holder described her role in championing these organisations [NPOs] and in ensuring that local NPOs met or exceeded the conditions set for them by Arts Council England. The NPOs had opened up their sites to attract visitors to the City, run by a range of organisations. In answer to a question regarding NPOs' curation of their environs, the Portfolio Holder gave her view that the Council and others had to do better to improve the environs of Firstsite.

The work of the Creative Colchester Partnership, chaired by Hana Loftus, was outlined and examples given of funding obtained. The vital role of the Council's support was underlined.

The Portfolio Holder confirmed that work continued with the local Business Improvement

District [BID] and with the University, including on improving the City centre's offer to students to draw more footfall from the University. Work had progressed on a local listings scheme, on seeking to clear the site between Curzon Cinema and Firstsite, and on reducing the duplication of marketing efforts for the City by different partners. A new marketing group had been set up to streamline marketing efforts. When asked as to whether the Council was working with Visit Essex to reduce marketing duplication, the Portfolio Holder explained that most of this work was carried out by Claire Taylor in the local Tourism Group. Frank Hargrave, Museum and Culture Manager, detailed ongoing work to assess costs and benefits of different forms of advertising with different potential partner agencies, such as Visit Essex. There was a concern that some local attractions would be overlooked by Visit Essex.

The situation regarding the Roman Circus was covered, with efforts ongoing to push the County Council to agree to extend the City Centre Masterplan to include it within its content. Virtual heritage options were being explored to show virtual reconstructions of sites such as the Circus. The Portfolio Holder gave assurance that the working group for the Circus would continue into the future. Simon Cairns, Development Manager, was overseeing the development plan, as part of continuing work to protect the site.

The 'Visit Colchester' guide included an overview of the 'Year of Celebration' events, including attractions in the wider Colchester area within the offer marketed.

The Panel asked the Portfolio Holder to clarify what work would likely have been carried out anyway, had there been no Council Portfolio Holder for this area. The Portfolio Holder explained that the Council's Cultural Strategy had been key to her role, and that she saw it as her duty to carry out that strategy, rather than decide herself what to pursue. A key part of her role was given to be taking a lead position in partnerships with organisations such as the BID.

Praise was given to the 'Visit Colchester' guide by Panel members, with one request being made to give more advertising to events such as the Rowhedge and Wivenhoe Regattas. The Panel asked as to how widely these were distributed, and was informed that they were distributed in places such as London Liverpool Street Station. The Portfolio Holder offered to check the areas to which copies were distributed.

The Portfolio Holder explained work that was carried out to arrange a concert of the works of Mozart and was asked what was being done to attract the long-term presence of artists, such as the musicians performing at that concert. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that this aim was being pursued with partner organisations.

A discussion of branding and marketing was held, with the Panel being told of efforts to improve the City's branding to exemplify pride in gaining city status. There were also plans being put in place to forging new links with other places, including via twinning.

Questions were asked as to what KPIs and methodology were used to measure success of Council actions, and what the Portfolio Holder's view as to what 'success' looked like. It was confirmed that there were KPIs included within both the Economic Strategy and as part of the Cultural Strategy. This included collection of data on visitor numbers, and showed the importance of data sharing between the Council and its partners such as the NPOs. A Panel member suggested that online reviews published on Google or Trip Advisor could be monitored.

The Portfolio Holder was asked whether Colchester's visitor centre was in the right location

[at the Hollytrees Museum, Castle Park]. The Portfolio signalled her openness to a larger, more accessible centre if a location could be found. Conversations had been held by Council officers and Historic England regarding how Council buildings such as the Town Hall could be used, and caution was noted that a move in location would increase costs, such as from needing to employ additional staff to run it.

Answering questions as to the budget set for the Council's legacy work, the Leader of the Council explained that this was currently between £50k and £100k, with some income to cover costs. Financial and non-financial support was expected from partners, such as to support the marketing efforts and 'Year of Celebration' programme.

The Panel received confirmation that work would be going ahead on both the Red Lion Yard mosaic, and the renovation of the Natural History Museum. It was expected that costs would rise. Public consultation was ongoing regarding plans to improve the Museum, open up the frontage and add a café. Results from this were awaited.

The Panel discussed what eras from history should be concentrated upon in Colchester. The Portfolio Holder noted that, as Britain's first city, the Roman era remained important to showcase, with virtual options and experiences available to show the local ancient heritage and what it would have looked like. This could be linked to Roman festivals, gladiatorial exhibitions, and the offer at the Castle's museum. There was no timescale agreed for installing virtual displays, but this was being expedited with partners.

The Portfolio Holder and Leader of the Council agreed with a view from the Panel that cultural exchanges, including via twinning, were important for encouraging tourism and the local economy. A Panel member noted that not all of the signs welcoming people to Colchester mentioned the twinning arrangements with other places. The Leader agreed that more attention needed to be paid to twinning, with the Council taking a role of civic leadership. An assurance was given to the Panel that the Leader would address this and make a budget available for civic exchange activities and welcoming guests from twinned settlements.

The Panel asked for an explanation as to the prioritisation of different workstreams, and their respective urgencies. The Leader told the Panel that work was underway to set priorities and that plans were expected to be in place before May 2023.

A Panel member suggested that plays could be held at the site of the outline of a Roman Theatre at the Gosbecks Archaeological Park. The Portfolio Holder gave details of the plans for that site, working in partnerships such as with Reading University. Progress would be made, including the use of virtual display augmentations. The Archaeological Park was included within the Cultural Strategy and the University of Durham was working to examine the site's Iron Age heritage. Geophysical surveying had been carried out and was being analysed. The University intended to use this work to feed into an application for funding to carry out a national study of Iron Age heritage. New Berechurch Dyke interpretation boards had been installed and gave information on the Iron Age heritage in that area, and the Portfolio Holder gave her support to the idea of a heritage trail, with information boards, for Monkwick.

A Panel member asked if a lexicography could be published to cover city status issues, explaining what is meant by terms such as 'city centre', which the Council tends to use to describe the traditional centre of Colchester, rather than modern economic centres which have arisen. Also highlighted was the need to be clear about whether areas fell within the area of different funding schemes. Eight Ash Green was within the Town Deal boundary,

which precluded it from applying for funding from the Rural Prosperity Fund, even though it had received nothing from the Town Deal funding.

The Portfolio Holder laid out the complexities caused by definitions varying between different projects and schemes and agreed that it was important to discuss and agree clear definitions. The Panel were told that this would involve officers, Cabinet colleagues and other elected members. The Leader argued that the Council should define boundaries for funding applications as possible, to seek a maximisation of potential funding awards.

The Panel discussed the desirability of advertising local attractions to neighbouring areas, with Panel and Portfolio Holder agreeing that it was important to capture visitors from the areas around Colchester. The Council and its partners were keen to look at how to turn visits into repeat visits. The digital strategy was an important part of this, including phone and electronic advertising.

The Chairman thanked the Portfolio Holder for her participation and underlined the importance of the Cultural Strategy, with many players and partners working together to promote cultural offerings in Colchester.

#### **394. Work Programme 2022-2023**

*RESOLVED* that the work programme for 2022-2023 be noted and approved.