

Extract from the minutes of the Policy Panel meeting of 15 June 2022

47. Have Your Say!

Ms. Vivien Collins addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) to raise her concerns regarding the recent Elections Act and its requirement that, as of May 2023, voters will need to show valid photographic identification documentation [ID] at polling stations when voting in parliamentary or local elections. Ms. Collins provided the background to this issue, including Cabinet Office research which had stated that, of 46m voters, it was estimated that around 3.5m would not have in-date or valid photographic ID.

Government laid out that local authorities would be responsible for providing a service to provide free photographic ID to those who needed it in order to vote. Ms Collins raised a number of potential problems, including where photos in ID became out of date and unlike the valid ID holder's current appearance, and who would adjudicate whether an ID was valid. Ms. Collins requested that information be provided as to how the Council intended to advertise the service for providing photo ID which it would have to start operating, as this would be necessary to tell people how they could go about applying for an ID. Ms. Collins also asked for information to be provided as to what training would be given to those officers who would be called upon to adjudicate as to whether or not an ID being presented was accepted as being valid and legitimately presented.

The Panel addressed and shared Ms. Collins concerns, suggesting that this may well be a matter for Cabinet to look into, or to direct Policy Panel to consider what measures the Council could take to ensure voters were not disenfranchised. Councillor David King, Leader of the Council, attended and, with the permission of the Chairman, addressed the Panel to give his assurance that it would be a fundamental priority for the Council to ensure access to voting and to make this as easy as possible. The Panel agreed that a recommendation should be made [under the agenda item relating to the Panel's Work Programme] to Cabinet that Policy Panel be authorised to examine the issues relating to voter ID requirements. It was requested that officers provide Ms. Collins with the details as to how this issue would be addressed, following the meeting.

48. Work Programme

The Panel considered whether to recommend that changes be made to its terms of reference, potentially to codify a proactive role for the Panel to recommend subjects to Cabinet for future consideration by the Panel. It was noted that the Leader of the Council had indicated an openness to suggested changes if these might encourage more members of the public to bring ideas forward. The Panel considered whether a change in wording was necessary to achieve this. Councillor David King, Leader of the Council, gave his support for encouraging members of the public to raise ideas

with the Panel, whilst ensuring that such ideas were within the remit of the Council to take action, and were feasible when considering officer time and finance that they might require. The Leader posited his view that the precise wording of the terms of reference were less-important than the Panel and Cabinet working in a spirit of cooperation, with two-way conversation and flexibility. In light of the commitments made by the Leader of the Council, the Panel gained assurance and did not wish to pursue wording changes to its terms of reference at the present time.

The Panel discussed the items for scheduling in to its Work Programme, and possible subjects to recommend for Cabinet approval to be added to the Panel's Work Programme. Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), suggested that, being conscious of the need to focus officer time on delivering the Council's priorities, it might be helpful to Cabinet for the Policy Panel to focus its efforts on these priorities, to get the most out of finite officer resources.

The Leader of the Council suggested that the Panel might wish to first look at whether and how it wished to proceed with its existing workstreams on the structure of future Grounds Maintenance services and stewardship of Green and Blue Infrastructure, finding ways to maximise the utility gained from the Council's open spaces and address priorities such as increasing biodiversity. These subjects could potentially be considered by the Environment and Sustainability Panel, should the Policy Panel wish to examine other issues.

The Panel welcomed and considered the Leader's suggestions. A Panel member argued that the current and future Grounds Maintenance arrangements was a long-running item of work for the Policy Panel, and should remain so.

The Panel considered whether it wished to seek Cabinet approval to examine ways in which the Council could act to mitigate effects of the cost of living crisis on residents in vulnerable financial positions, and to continue to provide vital services and identify those residents in need.

Support was voiced for the consideration of the ramifications and opportunities presented by Colchester's achievement of city status. It was suggested that the Leader and Chief Executive talk to the leadership of Chelmsford City Council to gain their experiences of the process, effects and opportunities. It was also suggested that residents of the Borough should be asked their views on the achieving of city status. A Panel member urged that the Council should still maintain its Borough ethos and not lose sight of the rural parts of the Borough. The possibility of potential future boundary changes, as a result of population increases, was raised, along with a suggestion that the Council should examine the current rights of the Borough and the Council, and to seek assurance that these would be transferable to still apply once Colchester's city status was formally confirmed by the issuing and receipt of the relevant letters patent. The Leader of the Council emphasised that the Council wanted to do more than just change nameplates and letterheads and wanted to ensure that the Council put energy into moving forward and showing stakeholders the opportunities which city status could hold for them and for the progress of projects and improvements within the Borough. A key question would be how best to use the momentum generated.

The Panel considered whether it should request permission to examine ways to pursue measures to address the Climate Change Emergency and achieve the Council's target of carbon neutrality. A member queried whether there was a formal policy to codify the Council's approach, arguing strongly in favour of having such a policy to show how the Council was working and would work to meet its targets.

A request was made by a member of the Panel for a recommendation to be put to Cabinet that the Policy Panel be allowed to examine potential ways to strengthen the Council's enforcement of planning conditions on developments, such as where work deadlines were breached, work was left unfinished or necessary maintenance not carried out, all causing problems for residents. The Panel member suggested that a policy should be drawn up to hold property management companies to account. If this would be impossible under current law, a further suggestion was made that the Panel could discuss how best to lobby parliamentarians to push for a change in current legislation in order to allow such a policy to be drawn up by local authorities. The Panel discussed these suggestions, with a view being given by one member that there were already ways for the Council to enforce planning conditions. A Panel member noted that a similar discussion had been held in the previous year, with the advice from the Monitoring Officer being that this would be a matter for the Local Plan Committee, rather than for the Policy Panel. There was some debate and differing views regarding whether Local Plan Committee would be the appropriate body for this. Officers agreed to raise this question with the Monitoring Officer and provide his view on this subject at the next meeting of the Panel. The Leader of the Council opined that the best way to address enforcement of planning conditions could be via the Portfolio Holder pushing for action. The Panel then discussed whether training could be provided to all councillors to detail planning and development issues, the enforcement powers of the Council and ways in which enforcement could be carried out, within the existing legislative framework. Richard Clifford, Democratic Services Manager, explained that this could be provided by officers in-house and so could potentially be arranged quickly, once he had discussed this with relevant colleagues.

The Panel discussed the scheduling of its work programme, on the assumption that Cabinet would approve the subject put forward by the Panel. It was suggested that Voter ID requirements and city status ramifications should be tabled for early in the municipal year, with an update on the Grounds Maintenance contract to be scheduled for later in the year. Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager (Neighbourhood Services), offered to arrange a site visit and briefing for the Panel at the Shrub End Depot, followed by a formal report to a future meeting of the Panel. This was welcomed by the Panel. It was also suggested that the update on Council mitigations of financial inequality be moved to an earlier meeting, on 21 September 2022, given the worsening cost-of-living crisis.

An update on the drafting of a Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy was requested, and it was proposed that an initial update be given on 21 September, with a broader report on this later in the municipal year, once more work had been carried out. A Panel member suggested that some of the initial work on this could be done by the Environment and Sustainability Panel before it returned to Policy Panel. Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment) advised that the Panel could work with the Environment and Sustainability Panel on this, albeit that the Green and Blue

Strategy would cover a wider range of subjects than those within the remit of that Panel, including economic regeneration, health and wellbeing and other issues. This meant that it would therefore be appropriate for examination by the Policy Panel. The Council was currently working with Essex University on examining potential uses of riverways and an update on this could be provided at the Panel's meeting on 21 September 2022. A suggestion was made by the Panel that the two Panels could potentially hold a joint meeting on this subject.

The Panel considered a suggestion that it should look at whether to recommend a move to change the election cycle to one where elections to all Council seats would be held once in a single election every four years. The Panel discussed this and agreed that this was a political issue which would need considerable discussion, and would not be a good fit for the work of the Policy Panel.

The Panel agreed that it was important for all of its meetings to be open and welcoming to encourage members of the public to attend and speak. Suggestions were made that the Panel could engage with parish councils and the local councillor network. A Panel member requested that the Panel's meeting on 3 August be advertised as widely as possible, to invite members of the public to attend and present their views, ideas and suggestions. The Panel also agreed that it wished to be able to receive updates on progress attained on issues and work that it had examined, to talk through how progress was being made on any recommendations from the Panel which gained Cabinet approval.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that Policy Panel be given approval to examine the following subjects:

- a) City Status, ramifications and opportunities
- b) New voter ID requirements
- c) Cost of living crisis
- d) Green/Blue infrastructure strategy update
- e) Developing the roles of CBC Champions
- f) Climate Change Policy [potentially in cooperation with the Environment and Sustainability Panel]
- g) Enforcement of Planning conditions and how to strengthen this [dependent on advice from Monitoring Officer]

RESOLVED that the Chairman and Lead Group Members on the Policy Panel agree the scheduling of items for the Policy Panel's work programme for 2022-23, prior to the Panel's next meeting and subject to those items being approved by Cabinet for the Panel to consider.