

Environment and Sustainability Panel

29 November 2022

Present: Councillor Tracey Arnold (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Molly Bloomfield
Councillor Michelle Burrows
Councillor Andrew Ellis
Councillor Richard Kirkby-Taylor
Councillor Kayleigh Rippingale
Councillor Lee Scordis (Chair)
Councillor Michael Spindler

Substitutes: Councillor Laws for Councillor Sue Lissimore
Councillor Barber for Councillor William Sunnucks

76. Have Your Say!

Rik Andrew attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with Colchester City Council's Have Your Say! provisions. The Panel heard that 90% of airborne pollutants came from vehicle exhaust emissions, and as a result of this Colchester's chronic traffic congestion was a great concern, requiring more action than the minor mitigation measures which were being discussed by the Panel. Mr Andrew supported the Future Transport Strategy for Colchester in principle, but wondered when action would be taken to transform Colchester to a city which was active, safe and sustainable? The Panel heard that a new station had been constructed at Cambridge North using the existing mainline, and it was suggested that a new station could be built at Colchester East on the mainline, serving Tendring. Mr Andrew questioned the description of a bus as a rapid transport system, and called for consideration to be given to the implementation of a tram system in Colchester. He queried the need for a new link road, which was guaranteed to introduce more traffic when the only way to improve air quality was to reduce traffic.

Councillor Scordis, in his role as Chair of the Panel, acknowledged that more work was needed to help improve air quality, however, he noted that management of the city's infrastructure was largely down to Essex County Council as the Highways Authority, and therefore often out of the direct control of the City Council. He suggested that improvements to public transport were of key importance, but required funding, which was an issue given the extreme budgetary pressures faced by most Councils.

Mandy Jones, Assistant Director – Place and Client Services, advised the Panel that there were several areas of current work that would support active travel, in particular the Masterplan work which was happening in the city centre which would include a future transport plan produced in conjunction with Essex County Council.

Councillor Barber declared a non-pecuniary interest in the discussion by virtue of his role as Deputy Cabinet Member for Highways for Essex County Council. Although improvements to the public realm were desired by everyone, one of the main difficulties which was encountered was obtaining funding to support this. Schemes were being considered which would improve the transport links in the city, and some of the focus of discussions between the City and County Council's was focussed on revolutionising the transport strategy to drive up footfall in the town centre.

Mr Andrew appreciated the future planning which was taking place, but considered that traffic issues needed to be addressed more urgently. He did not believe that his suggestion of a new railway station on the existing line had been considered as part of transport planning work.

In discussion, the Panel believed that the possibility of an additional railway station had been considered some years ago, but had been found to be impractical. Councillor Scordis, as Chair of the Panel, would liaise with the relevant Cabinet Member before providing a written response to Mr Andrew addressing the possibility of reconsidering a new station, or delaying the new link road.

77. Carbon Management Plan and the Council's emissions

The Panel considered a report outlining how the Council would take forward the options outlined in its Heat Decarbonisation Plans.

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Officer's report set out the Council's emissions for the financial year 2021/2022, in terms of the volume of gas and electricity consumption, fleet emissions, and staff commuting. Work had been undertaken with Ingleton Wood, a consultant involved in site surveys of Council buildings in order to identify energy saving measures which could be implemented in the properties. Heat decarbonisation plans were now being received for each of the buildings which set out the current status of each building and provided a set of options which could be considered to increase future energy efficiency, including the net cost of buying and running any improvements.

The reports were being considered at present, and it was accepted that some of the buildings may be more problematic to improve than others. Once all the plans had been assessed, it was intended to bring a further report back to the Panel in the new year seeking feedback on future plans and ideas.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

78. Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Air Quality Project Update

The Panel considered a report providing an update on the DEFRA funded air quality behaviour change projects, covering roadside signage, the CAReless Pollution Campaign, and the Homeburning Campaign, together with a new funding bid that is currently being considered by DEFRA.

Emily Harrup, Transport and Sustainability Joint Lead, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquires. The Panel heard that air pollution contributed to 36,000 deaths every year, at a total cost to the National Health Service (NHS) of £157m per year, and 1 in 20 deaths in Colchester were linked to poor air quality. There were currently 3 Air Quality Management Areas in Colchester, and it was considered that disadvantaged communities were most likely to be affected.

Belinda Silkstone, Environmental Protection Manager, attended the meeting and addressed the Panel. The Panel heard that there were 65 diffusion tubes within Colchester which measured the pollutant nitrogen dioxide at various points across the borough, together with a continuous monitoring station at Brooke Street. An annual status report was produced for DEFRA including monitoring data and any actions which had been taken under Colchester City Council (the Council)'s Air Quality Plan. This report was appraised by DEFRA, who indicated whether or not they approved the actions that had been taken with regard to air quality in the city.

The DEFRA grant bids which had been made were to support work undertaken with respect to Colchester's Air Quality Management Areas, and although it was not possible to influence infrastructure within the city as the Council was not the Highway Authority, it was possible to influence behaviour in a bid to improve air quality. Overall, air quality was improving, but there remained some hotspots, and these hotspots were identified to the Panel on a map of the city centre. Air quality was improving, and in 2021 exceedances had only been registered in Osborne Street, Mersey Road and the end of Brooke Street.

Emily Harrup advised the Panel that the first DEFRA funding had been received in 2019, and since then 4 successful bids had brought in over £746,000 in funding towards behaviour change projects. It was considered that the successful bids had been supported by the Council's asses-based community approach to tackling pollution, working with communities and taking an educational approach. Awareness of the harm caused by air pollution had increased, and the quality of the air had improved.

The Panel received an update on the Council's roadside signage project which considered how psychological behaviours change messages could be used in road signs. The project was in partnership with the University of Essex, who were able to explore the impact of the signage on the number of drivers switching off their engines. The messages used were grounded in different psychological approaches to social influence, and these had already been proven to be successful in short term trials. It was, however, the Council's intention to determine whether these behaviour changes could be sustained over a longer period of time. Signs had been positioned

at 3 locations, East Gates level crossing, and the north and south side of Brook Street, and the study was carried out between February 2021 and September 2022, when data from over 150,000 vehicles was collected. The data collected showed that the signs had triggered a distinct increase in the number of drivers switching off their engines with a peak average being a switch off rate of 26%, which represented an increase in engine switch offs of 11% compared to baseline data. Colchester's was the only long term study on the effectiveness of signage, and it had produced similar results to short term studies in this area in terms of the number of switch offs. It was therefore proposed to make the signage a permanent feature, with further consideration being given to additional signage in other areas of the Air Quality Management Area. Signage was cost effective and low maintenance, it had been demonstrated that long term static signs were most effective, and the most effective messages had been encouraging drivers to join in with others (social norms). An additional message had been trialled warning motorists of the dangers to their health caused by idling and this had been a very successful message.

With regard to the Council's CAREless campaign, a film had been prepared demonstrating residents making use of the toolkits which had been provided by the Council and which would be circulated to the Panel after the meeting. Businesses had been approached to engage them with the project, including delivery drivers who were perceived to be a penitential issue with regard to idling. Results from the first 12 months of the project, with 56% of drivers saying that they were switching off their engines more often, increasing to 65% outside schools. The campaign had received national recognition and had been highly commended in Edie's National Sustainability Leaders Awards 2022.

The Panel heard that an additional project which had been run from December 2021 to March 2022 had been the Homeburning campaign which had sought to raise awareness of the health impacts of home fires and log burners. Castle and Christchurch wards had been targeted as these were found to have the highest numbers of burners, with users being encouraged to take positive action to 'burn safe, burn better, burn cleaner and burn less'. Homeburning events had been delivered at a number of locations, and had been well attended, with a 19% increase in awareness of the dangers of home burning being recorded. It was intended to re-run the campaign over the Christmas period 2023, and a particular area for concern was the indication that people would open up their fireplaces as these were seen as a potential free or cheaper source of heat.

Care had been taken to promote the legacy of the campaign in local communities, and street scape messaging was planned in conjunction with a local artist, and work supporting Clean Air Colchester would be ongoing. Other local authorities had approached the Council seeking advice on the methods that had been used and other areas of good practice.

An additional bid for funding had been submitted to DEFRA for £310,770, and it was hoped that this money would be used in conjunction with planned infrastructure changes to fill gaps in knowledge, resources and support, with a focus on travel behaviour change for journeys up to 3 miles from the city centre.

The Panel was interested in the contact which had been made with Deliveroo, and wondered whether there was a designated place for delivery drivers to be able to park without fear of receiving fines while they waited for food to be prepared. It was suggested that those working in the gig economy should not face the fear of fines while they were working, and it was considered that engines may be left idling in a bid to avoid receiving a parking ticket. A Panel member noted that the volume of delivery drivers who could be parked on the pavement at any one time could be a source of anxiety for pedestrians and wondered whether a firmer approach to this issue may be appropriate, or whether delivery companies could be encouraged towards more environmentally friendly transport options like e-bikes. Emily Harrup advised the Panel that it was intended to work closely with Deliveroo and other delivery companies in the future, and a wide range of options would be considered.

Mandy Jones reminded the Panel that DEFRA favoured an educational approach to the issues which had been raised, with particular focus on behavioural insights and behaviour change. The methods which had been used by the Council to tackle air quality issues had been successful in instigating behaviour change and raising awareness of air pollution issues. Studies which had been carried out in other local authorities demonstrated that the use of enforcement practices to encourage behaviour change had not been as effective, although all options would be considered by the Council. The Panel heard that the work which had been undertaken was nationally recognised, and Emily Harrup was highly lauded and had been invited to speak at conferences, explaining the projects which had been undertaken.

In discussion, the Panel sought clarification on evidence showed that sustained signs long term would have a continuous benefit, and it was confirmed that the study did show that long term signs which were based on psychological messaging were effective. It was suggested that methods for reducing carbon in the atmosphere could be considered as part of this work, but the Panel heard that DEFRA did not provide funding for projects aimed at reducing pollution already in the air, but only those which sought to remove or reduce pollution at source. A Panel member noted that there was a significant space at the top of Brooke Street which was owned by Essex County Council Highways, and which could support the planting of a tree to improve the area.

A Panel member suggested that additional signage could be installed further down roads affected by air pollution, and not just at traffic lights and junctions, and this would be explored, although the locations of signs was limited by the availability of load bearing traffic infrastructure to mount them on.

In response to a question from a Panel member, Belinda Silkstone confirmed that the responsibility for air quality management did with the borough authority, however, it was anticipated that the forthcoming Environment Bill would give Essex County Council more of a duty to work collaboratively with borough councils. Essex County Council were putting together an Air Quality Management Strategy for Essex, and the Council had been invited to collaborate on this.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

79. Climate Emergency Action Plan Update

The Panel considered a report detailing key progress made with the Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP), and other relevant updates since September 2022.

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The attention of the Panel was drawn to the work being carried out by the Planning Policy Team on the creation of 3 new Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) that would help interpret the adopted Local Plan. The SPDs related to sustainability, and covered biodiversity, active travel and climate change in relation to developments. What the SPDs would contain would be best practice guidance within developments, and they would be submitted to the Local Plan Committee at the start of 2023. The Panel was invited to submit any ideas or areas of good practice which they would like to be considered for inclusion in the SPDs.

The Council had launched an e-cargo bike delivery service in the city centre in the run up to Christmas. The service would enable shoppers in the city centre to drop their shopping off as a designated hub on Priory Walk and continue to enjoy the city centre without their shopping, and have the shopping delivered to the home on either the same day, or the next day.

The Council's electric vehicle car club had also been launched, and the first car was available in Priory Street car park, and it was hoped that the scheme would expand over time into different suitable locations.

The Panel applauded the idea of the e-cargo bike delivery service, considering that it would enable shoppers to walk or cycle to town without the need to worry about how to get their shopping home.

In discussion, the Panel wondered whether it would be possible to consider other locations for the electric car club, particularly in under used car parks or in areas where levels of car ownership were low. Emily Harrup confirmed to the Panel that it was planned that the initial 2 electric car clubs would be located in the city centre, however, consideration was also being given to requesting that the clubs formed part of new developments, and it was intended that work would be undertaken with local communities to identify suitable locations for additional clubs in the future.

Turning to the proposed SPDs, a Panel member requested that consideration be given to the prohibiting of fake plastic grass, and addressing the trend of turning front gardens into additional car parking spaces, both of which impacted on drainage and surface runoff. Support was offered for road speed restrictions of 20mph in new developments, and it was requested that consideration be given to requiring secure cycle parking to be provided in all new developments, whether the developments were residential or commercial. It was suggested that consideration should be given to the use of sustainable building materials, such as timber frames or limecrete. Consideration should also be given to requesting as high a level of BREEAM rating as possible from developers.

Mandy Jones, Assistant Director – Place and Client Services, advised the Panel that the SPDs would be referred to the Local Plan Committee, and that some early engagement work had already taken place which the Panel had been invited to. As drafts were prepared it was intended that there would be further engagement with the Panel and with the public as well.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

80. Work Programme 2022-2023

Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the work programme be noted.