

Extract from the draft minutes of the Policy Panel meeting of 30 November 2022

59. Have your say on the future of Colchester

Mr Chilvers attended and addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) to highlight a number of concerns which he had wanted to raise at an earlier focus group meeting which had been cancelled. The Panel were asked whether the Council's leisure facilities had to be so concentrated at the Leisure World site, referencing fitness and sports options possible elsewhere in the area. Mr Chilvers then asked for a wider roll-out of wheelie bins, to areas which did not currently have them, citing changing demographics as an argument in favour of this. Regarding the night-time economy, Mr Chilvers recommended a review to gather information if the Council wished to encourage more city-centre residential properties. Problems within the city were given as including bad driving, traffic congestion, fear of crime and antisocial behaviour and the harm these problems did to the image of the city and to its businesses. Mr Chilvers advocated greater policing and enforcement to solve issues and encourage more people to live in the city centre. Moving on to GP services, Mr Chilvers posited that the Council needed to factor in the need for increases to GP provision for residents in the city centre, along with other professional services and street cleansing resources. Finally, Mr Chilvers cautioned that the use of online-only surveys might skew the data received unless the demography of the respondents was very similar to that of the city's residents in general.

A statement was read on behalf of Mrs Williams (who was unable to attend the meeting), pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1). Mrs Williams raised concern about abandoned vehicles and asked if such vehicles could be removed more quickly, and broken up and recyclable parts recycled. Mrs Williams also urged the Council to collect household recycling materials in one single collection, rather than collecting different materials separately. Finally, Mrs Williams argued in favour of free parking options for shoppers, noting the cost of existing car parks in Colchester, compared to free parking in retail developments such as Lakeside.

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager – Neighbourhood Services, informed the Panel that she would contact Mrs Williams to get details of the issues raised.

Rory Doyle, Strategic Director, described the period of consultation and focus group operation, including residents, people who worked in the area, firms and other local stakeholders. This meeting had been promoted for members of the public to address councillors directly and invitations were sent to members of the public who had wanted to attend other consultation groups but who had been unable to do so.

Tricia Smith and Libby Britcher, Research and Change Officers, explained the

consultation with those who lived or worked in Colchester, giving information on the demographics of those involved and showing which Council wards were under- or over-represented within the responses. More women than men had responded, with a number of respondents declining to give a gender and some identifying as non-binary. There was strong representation from the age groups 25-34 and 64+.

Positives and negatives were raised about living and working in Colchester, but most respondents agreed that they enjoyed living or working here. The main priorities which had been raised were ranked according to how many people raised them, with 'safe, healthy, active communities' ranked highest, being mentioned by 60.4% of respondents. Second was 'a fair economy, so all benefit' being mentioned by 39.5% of respondents. Third was the priority of addressing the climate challenge, at 37.3%.

25% of responses gave the city centre as a priority, dealing with transformation, addressing of perceived decline and some mentions of safety issues.

Priorities for Council spending saw 85% of responses wanting environmental work to be prioritised and 35.9% supporting spending on the related work on parks and open spaces. The lowest priority given for spending was for corporate functions, mentioned by only 0.9% of responses. A general consensus was that people wanted the Council to maintain its oversight of services, even where these were contracted to the private sector. Concern was raised that corners would be cut without the presence of strong Council oversight of work done.

The Research and Change Officers described the wide variety of interlocking issues which had been raised. These included city centre regeneration, filling of retail units, mending of pavements and making best use of cultural and heritage assets to increase tourism. It was noted that 13% of respondents felt negatively about receiving city status and comments were received on perceived negative effects on the city centre, caused by local retail parks. Youth service provision, perceived lack of infrastructure and transport/travel problems had been raised and, whilst the overall support for environmental action was high, a number of pro-car comments had also been received.

Themes had been identified and then used to direct the discussion groups, with the approach being described. A key theme raised was the importance of a joined-up approach to improvements within communities across all wards, with a long-term focus on what is wanted for the future. People underlined the wish for Colchester to keep its own identity but to seek inspiration from good ideas from elsewhere too. The potential city centre changes were covered, with a potential for its use to shift from retail to residential and experiences [e.g., entertainments, social use, culture and food and drink provision].

Youth empowerment was discussed, which included engagement with pupils in local schools to explore what young people could do and to empower, rather than discourage from engagement. It was important to choose the right communication channels and to clarify whether young people in the area wanted more empowerment.

The relationship between city centre and retail parks was covered, with positives of

both types of retail experience brought up by participants in discussion groups. Views were given that the city centre was more about experiences, whilst retail parks generally provided convenience. Issue, solutions and ideas were considered to improve use of the city centre and retail parks, with ways sought for retail parks to feed into and complement the city centre.

Regarding environment issues, this discussion group's participants all used the Council's garden waste service, but not many would pay for such a service. None of the participants had a wheelie bin, with opinions split roughly equally between those who did want one and those who did not. Keen interest was expressed in ways to expand recycling options.

The Panel discussed the methodology and evidence base for the consultation and information-gathering work. More information was requested about how the data was gathered and percentages of population/statistics given and how demographics of respondents related to the overall demographics of the Colchester populace. The Research and Change Officers explained that the population of the Borough (as was) at the last census had been around 192,000. Percentages of population (e.g., in regard to percentage of population who responded to the consultation) were calculated based on that figure.

A Panel member raised concern that the response rate was under 1%, with views being drawn from a small sample and a 'digital first' approach to engagement excluding some demographics from participation, where individuals often had limited access to the internet. The Research and Change Officers explained that officers had done what was possible within the budget set for the consultation. Non-digital options were possible if more money and officer time could be allocated to the project. Sampling based on demographics gave residents equal opportunities to take part, and options for residents to respond were outlined.

Councillor King, Leader of the Council, identified the online survey as a supplement to the wider consultation exercise with the public and councillors. It had not been possible to achieve a perfect sampling, but the sample had been a significant one. The Leader of the Council pledged to endeavour to make all councillors a part of the ongoing consultation work.

The Panel discussed the demographics of the respondents to the online survey, with concern at the problems caused by it being only online, but acknowledgment that the face-to-face consultation sessions mitigating these to an extent. A range of views were given by members, including on travel needs, wheelie bin provision, GP provision, parking options and use of heritage assets. Waste collection was discussed, with a view given that the different options should be considered, and that it should be shown to people why costly options were unaffordable. Improvements to infrastructure would require significant planning and a wider focus than purely on housing numbers. A member urged the Panel to give residents another chance to give their views at its next meeting.

Concern was expressed by some members at their view that the survey was focussed on the City's centre and ignored rural areas. It was posited that the surveying of Colchester needed greater breakdown into different areas, with a Panel

member urging greater use of data held by the Council to identify a range of people of which to ask questions. Local centres included the city centre, Stanway and Northern Gateway. A Panel member argued that a long term view should be being taken and that a wider consultation should be carried out, including rural residents and questions on issues affecting the different parts of the Council's area. The Research and Change Officers explained that consultation had been carried out with parish and town councils. The Strategic Director gave assurance that the consultation work had not been intended to be city-centric and that he would raise this concern with the Communications Team. A residents panel was to be set up for ongoing engagement and demographics would need to be monitored to improve the representativeness of those involved. A Panel member suggested dropping use of the phrase 'Just Colchester', in order to make this project more inclusive.

A Panel member noted that survey response rates were lower for Council wards which were further from the city centre. Concern was expressed about the lack of input from those under the age of 18 and that more needed to be done to gain responses from age demographics where response rates were low. Another member of the Panel agreed with the need for inclusivity, but stressed the financial pressures which placed limits on what could be done. There could be scope for youth representation from school councils, potentially engaging with resident panels.

A Panel member expressed the importance of protecting open spaces, dealing with parking, traffic and road issues, and the need to educate people in alternatives to car use. Community facilities were put forward as helping new residents to bed in to communities and engage with them.

Answering questions, the Research and Change Officers explained that more information could be given on the comments made regarding lack of infrastructure, but that these could not be used to give statistics or percentages. Having been asked how scoping and selection for the resident panel had been conducted, the Officers informed the Panel that they had engaged with existing groups, cognisant of the danger of producing an echo chamber. Work would be conducted to bring in representatives of those groups underrepresented. The aim was to target those most affected by issues in question and help would be needed to with outreach. Additional staffing resource would also be necessary. The Strategic Director emphasised that the officers who had conducted the surveying and consultation had designed the project within the parameters they had been set and suggested that the Panel seemed to wish to alter the parameters and widen and continue consultation. Panel members suggested use of community newsletters and other options.

Councillor Cox, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage, agreed that the methodology employed was important that those planning the city status programme would take on the ideas raised. The next step was the year of celebration. Big events were planned, to draw tourists and focus on heritage across the area. Part of this would involve community-generated ideas, and the Portfolio Holder named a selection of these. Legacy planning continued to be worked upon.

Addressing wishes to increase youth engagement, the Portfolio Holder told the Panel of the setting up of the 'Democracy in Schools' programme which could be part of this engagement.

The Leader of the Council reiterated the promise that the Council would listen to all views, and recognised the hard work of the officers who had carried out the consultative work programme. This had covered master-planning for the city centre, working with the County Council. Cabinet would continue to take on views and recommendations and the whole consultation included surveying, consultation sessions, councillors, committees and local stakeholders and partners. Over 11,000 survey responses had been received.

The Chairman asked if further invitations to take part could be sent to those who had yet to respond. The Strategic Director cautioned that this would be dependent on whether there was sufficient officer time and resources.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that Cabinet focus on the importance of obtaining views from young people [under 18], and residents who were digitally excluded.

RESOLVED that the Panel would review the final report on the consultation/survey at its next meeting, with an additional opportunity for public views to be given.