

# SCRUTINY PANEL

## 7 June 2022

*Present: -*

Councillor Laws, Councillor Lilley, Councillor Lissimore, Councillor McCarthy, Councillor Scordis, Councillor Smith, Councillor Willetts

*Substitutions: -*

*Also present: -*

### **348. Minutes of previous meetings**

*RESOLVED* that the minutes of the meetings held on 15 March 2022 and 25 May 2022 be approved as correct records.

### **349. Decisions Taken Under Special Urgency Provisions**

There were no such decisions to report to this meeting. The Chairman informed members and officers that, for any decisions taken under special urgency provisions, he would expect to be provided with a timeline for the decision-making, to show why there was a need for the special urgency provisions to be used.

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

Councillor Paul Smith requested that the Panel schedule a future agenda item to scrutinize the methods used by the Council to pay this year's £150 Council Tax rebates (to address energy cost increases) and the ways in which the Council will provide these to those who do not pay Council Tax via direct debit, who were often those who were most financially vulnerable. The Panel considered this request, and it was suggested that this should go ahead, with the potential for a wider-ranging item in the future to look at any issues or problems identified, should such problems potentially have wider ramifications. Richard Block, Assistant Director for Corporate and Improvement, gave assurance that the necessary information could be provided by officers.

Councillor Lee Scordis requested that the Scrutiny Panel scrutinize bus service provision throughout the Borough, highlighting recent service cuts and network problems. Councillor Scordis expressed a wish to examine the reasons for changes to bus services within the Borough, the possible effects on the local economy and on efforts and measures intended to counteract climate change. It was noted that the Scrutiny Panel had already conducted scrutiny work on the Borough's bus services and that it might be hard to persuade the bus service providers to participate in a further review. Richard Block, Assistant Director for Corporate and Improvement, suggested that Council Officers could assimilate the reports received previously by

the Scrutiny Panel, including the outcomes of its last review of bus services, and bring this to the Panel for examination and consideration as to whether the Panel could add any further value by scrutinising the subject. Support was voiced for the intention to examine what impact changes to the bus network might be having to climate change and emissions levels. Officers were asked to inform the appropriate representatives of bus service providers of the Panel's intention to re-examine this issue, and to enquire as to whether they would be willing to participate in this work.

Councillor Lee Scordis requested that the Scrutiny Panel examine the issues caused by flooding at the Hythe, and their effects on Colchester. This would include consideration of the current situation, viable solutions to the problems caused and an assessment as to which stakeholders would need to contribute to finding solutions and/or mitigations. A Panel member suggested that it would be advisable to obtain an update from Will Quince, Member of Parliament for Colchester, who had brought together the stakeholders to meet and discuss the issues.

It was noted that the flooding problems had many stakeholders involved and that it would be hard for the Panel to scrutinise further than the officers and actions of the Council. The Panel considered whether it would be best to invite stakeholders and what the scope of the scrutiny work would be, whether an update on the situation was wanted or whether the Panel wanted to gather and consider evidence. The Chairman emphasised the need for the Panel to concentrate on matters upon which it could put forward a recognisable benefit, and recommended that the Panel receive a briefing note to summarise the current position and actions taken to date on addressing the flooding problem. The Panel could then assess what value it could potentially bring by scrutinising the situation, potentially inviting stakeholders to participate. The Panel noted that the question as to which agency or organisation would be responsible for rectifying the issues in question.

*RESOLVED* that the Scrutiny Panel will:

- a) Scrutinise the methods used by the Council to pay this year's £150 Council Tax rebates (to address energy cost increases) and the ways in which the Council will provide these to those who do not pay Council Tax via direct debit, with an item for this to be scheduled for the Panel's meeting on 5 July 2022
- b) Receive a briefing report on bus service provision, detailing the reports received previously on this topic by the Scrutiny Panel, including the outcomes of its last review of bus services, with this to be brought to the Panel's meeting on 5 July 2022 for examination and consideration as to whether to scrutinise the subject further
- c) Receive a briefing note regarding the ongoing flooding at the Hythe, giving the current situation and actions taken to date in aid of solving the problem, with this briefing note to be provided in preparation for the Panel's meeting on 5 July 2022

### **351. Town Deal Reporting**

Matt Sterling, Strategic Economic Growth Manager, presented his report and provided background information on the Scrutiny Panel's consideration of the Town Deal projects' business cases in February 2022, and the overall background of the bidding process which had led to the granting of £18.2 million from central government. Following the Panel's considerations, the business cases had been considered by Cabinet and submitted to central government for approval. Informal positive indications had been received back from central government and it was hoped that formal confirmation of the agreed funding would be received around the end of June.

The Strategic Economic Growth Manager agreed that there would be a valuable role for the Scrutiny Panel in examining progress, planning and synergies betwixt different projects. A walkaround had been held earlier that day, attended by four civil servants, to show the sites for the Town Centre projects. It was proposed that Scrutiny Panel should review progress six months after the funding had been confirmed, and then annually.

The Chairman noted that, when Cabinet had asked the Scrutiny Panel to scrutinise the business cases in early 2022, much work had been needed and the Panel had needed to rely on the views of the Section 151 Officer and members of the management team who had provided assurance regarding such matters as financial viability. The Panel had been given confidence in the strength of the projects and the risk management structure and mitigations put in place. However, concern had been expressed that the Panel did not get the time necessary to consider the business cases in their entirety, albeit receiving the aforementioned strong assurances from the relevant officers.

The Panel considered whether it would be prudent to re-examine the business cases after funding had been confirmed and allocated, giving Panel members the opportunity to question any areas of concern, especially given current inflationary pressures and the need to accommodate these. A request was made for a brief report on the business cases once funding had been approved. It was suggested that this should include a timeline of key events in the timeline for the projects, showing expected progress, as well as information on any further potential for leveraging more funding and any likely effects of possible delays or funding issues. Assurance was requested that these matters were under consideration and any risks were being managed. A Panel member underlined the need to avoid any potential loss of funding.

The Strategic Economic Growth Manager confirmed that inflationary pressures had already been encountered and considered. Costings for many of the projects had increased and 'We Are Colchester' had proved adept at adapting projects to accommodate inflationary pressures and remain viable.

A Panel member queried whether the projects had been ranked into an order of priority and, if so, what their ranking was, and what priority had been assigned to the project relating to Jumbo. The Strategic Economic Growth Manager explained that no priority scale had been set for the projects and explained that each was a stand-

alone project, albeit with synergies through linking with other projects. Government expected all projects to proceed unless this can be shown to be impossible. Liaison with government would need to occur over any changes which become necessary.

The Panel considered the timetabling of an update report on the Town Deal projects and, being advised that this could not be guaranteed for the Panel's meeting on 5 July 2022, agreed that this should be brought to the Panel for its meeting on 16 August 2022.

*RESOLVED* that the Scrutiny Panel will receive an update report on the progress of the Town Deal projects, to be scheduled for the Scrutiny Panel meeting due to occur on 16 August 2022.

### **352. Work Programme 2022-23**

The Panel discussed potential timings for portfolio holder briefings, and the form which these should take, with the noting of previous concerns raised by Panel members in 2021-22 that these briefings would be more useful if the Panel were to specify matters of particular concern and use these briefings to discuss them with the relevant members of Cabinet. The Panel agreed that this would likely help, especially when considering the timing of each briefing. It was noted that portfolio holders would need some time to gain experience in their new roles, given that this was a new administration, and it was felt that 16 August 2022 would be too early for the first briefing, and that the Cabinet Member for Resources should be invited to brief the Panel after the Council's 2023-24 Budget had been drafted, to scrutinise its aims and content. The Panel noted the importance that these briefings provide a good mix of successes and difficulties.

The Panel discussed how it would sit as the statutory Crime and Disorder Committee of the Council. A Panel member noted that previous meetings had seen all statutory and non-statutory partners invited to provide updates, which had resulted in such lengthy meetings that thorough scrutiny had proved impossible. A request was made that future meetings of that Committee concentrate less on statistics and figures and more on what efforts were being made to deal with perpetrators of crime and antisocial behaviour and to reduce recidivism. The Panel agreed that the Chairman would meet with lead group members to assess how to structure the next meeting of the Crime and Disorder Committee to best scrutinise the work of the Safer Colchester Partnership.

The Panel discussed the problems presented by heavy agendas leading to late finishes for meetings. These included guests being kept waiting before they were called forward for their items, and the Panel requested shorter meetings and a minimization of waiting times for external guests attending to provide evidence. It was noted that hybrid meeting capacity would reduce the need for guests to give evidence in person, and the Council was in the process of obtaining a system to allow for in-house hybrid meetings, live streamed via YouTube.

The Panel considered when it might want to next receive an update on the work of the arts organisations which were in receipt of Council funding. It was suggested by a Panel member that this should be widened to include an update from the relevant

portfolio holder to give an update and assurance that the Council is obtaining value for money from the funding it provided. The Panel agreed that there should be such an update scheduled for this municipal year and a suggestion was made that the Panel should specify the areas it most wants to look at, such as encouraging diversity and nurturing new talent, thus condensing the meeting around specific topics. The potential for a wider, all-councillor briefing was mooted, which could give the arts organisations an opportunity to give a wider explanation of their activities, with Scrutiny Panel then focusing in on a narrower consideration of their activities as they related to the requirements within the funding agreements made by the arts organisations with the Council. It was suggested that the holding of an all-councillor briefing be recommended to Councillor Doctor Pam Cox, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage.

The Panel were informed that the timing of the Panel's Annual Report to Council had been recommended for moving to the end of the 2022-23 municipal year, rather than the start of the 2023-24 municipal year. This would allow the Panel to report back on its work prior to any change in Panel membership which might occur at the start of the 2023-24 municipal year.

*RESOLVED* that: -

- a) The portfolio holder briefing on 16 August 2022 be cancelled
- b) The Cabinet Member for Resources be invited to brief the Panel after the Council's 2023-24 Budget had been drafted
- c) The Chairman and lead group members meet to assess how to structure the next meeting of the Crime and Disorder Committee to best scrutinise the work of the Safer Colchester Partnership, and how and whether to examine the governance arrangements relating to the Partnership now operating under the oversight of the wider One Colchester Partnership
- d) The Arts Organisations in receipt of Council funding be invited to a future meeting, which would focus on their commitments to the Council within the relevant funding agreements
- e) The Scrutiny Panel approves its Work Programme for 2022-23, with the cancellation of the portfolio holder briefing which had been proposed for 16 August 2022.

*RECOMMENDED* to the PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR CULTURE AND HERITAGE that an all-councillor briefing be arranged, to give the arts organisations in receipt of Council funding an opportunity to give a wide overview and explanation of their activities