

Extract from the draft minutes of the Scrutiny Panel meeting of 15 March 2023

City Status Update

The Panel received a report from the Strategic Director providing an update on the plans and the Council's approach to the benefits from the award of City Status. Lucie Breadman, Strategic Director, Lindsay Barker, Deputy Chief Executive and Executive Director, Place, and Matthew Brown, Economic Regeneration Manager, attended to present the report and assist the Panel.

The Strategic Director, together with the Economic Regeneration Manager, and Councillor King, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, made a presentation to the Panel addressing:-

- The aims and objectives of the Year of Celebration.
- The activities scheduled for the Year of Celebration and timescales. This was wide ranging and did not just concentrate on the city centre. It included a number of events in the rural wards such as the Layer Marney Opera Festival and the West Mersea Town Regatta.
- The tools available to help promote the Year of Celebration, such as the promotional stamps and the cityscape logo.
- The approach being taken with partners, particularly the Business Improvement District. The consensus with partners was that the approach should be to build on existing strengths, priorities and strategies, rather than establishing a new City Status Strategy and Action Plan.
- The benefits of City Status. It would raise aspirations, boost Colchester's image and reputation, give Colchester greater influence and demonstrate its importance in heritage terms. The BID had already reported that Colchester is appearing on new potential investment lists.
- Practical examples of change happening to the City Centre include the Town Deal and Levelling Up Fund projects. The Panel were shown projects focussing on heritage from this programme. The Town Deal and Levelling Up fund projects had a combined value of £40 million, excluding match finding, and were being treated as one programme.
- Some of the key Town Deal projects include the restoration of Jumbo, repairs and restoration of Holy Trinity Church so it could be brought back into use as a community hub, a number of public realm sites such as Holy Trinity Square and St Nicholas Square, and virtual reality tourism.
- The Town Deal projects include a heritage enriched walking route between Colchester Town Station and Firstsite, to improve first impressions of the city centre for those arriving at Colchester Centre Station, improved interpretation at St Botolph's Priory and improvements to the Roman Wall.
- The legacy of City Status. This would build on existing strengths and reflect the multi centre nature of modern Colchester. Recognition that this was about the whole of Colchester, with benefits for the historic core, urban and rural Colchester. The Local Government Association Peer Review Team believed that City Status put Colchester on the cusp of something great. Our strategic

plans, priorities and collaborative approach with partners along with an ambitious approach aim to enhance the benefits of City Status. .

The Chair of the Panel stressed the need for a lexicography of terms given the differing possible meanings and interpretations of the word “City” in this context, which caused confusion. The Chair also noted that there were considerable overlaps between this item and other items the Panel was invited to consider, such as the Town Deal and the Levelling Up projects. The Panel needed to be able to look in more granular detail at the impact of each project. There was concern that each of the items was becoming in effect a scrutiny of the Strategic Plan and it became increasingly difficult to see whether each component was performing adequately.

Councillor King emphasised that there were project disciplines that required the project teams to show what was achieved against the objectives set for the Town Deal and Levelling Up projects. There were clear criteria for the objectives and outcomes of these projects against which progress could and would be measured. It was appreciated that these projects were enmeshed with City Status and whilst these projects would be subject to individual scrutiny, this item brought them together in an overall package. The Executive Director, Place, stressed that work was underway to monitor the outcomes of these projects but that these were at an early stage.

The Chair sought clarification as to whether the Panel was being asked to scrutinise the whole of the Strategic Plan or to consider the additional opportunities that had arisen because of the award of City Status and if so then these needed to be clearly differentiated. Councillor King indicated that he accepted this point and of the need for the individual elements to be scrutinised in detail. However, it was still useful to consider more generally how the city was viewed and how this was changing as a consequence of the award of City Status.

In discussion members of the Panel sought clarification as to how the Year of Celebration would be promoted and marketed. For example would there be a social media campaign with partners and would hard copies of promotional material be made available for those who did not access social media and for use in neighbouring towns and other cities? The Strategic Director confirmed that marketing for the Year of Celebration was already underway and using a range of marketing media and tools. The joint marketing programme based on a shared vision was being led by the BID and was in an early stage of development. This would be key in helping come to an agreed view of what City Status meant for Colchester. There was still a place for hard copy advertising and marketing material and this would be provided, although increasingly venues such as stations were reluctant to take such material.

It was also suggested by members of the Panel that whilst there was a vision of what City Status could achieve, the challenge was to convert this vision into tangible results. In that context, the schedule of events was reassuring and this would be understood by residents in a way strategic visions for Colchester or detail about investment and finance would not be. The emphasis on the word “city” did not resonate with those in rural wards and tangible details about particular schemes was

more likely to be understood and welcomed than an emphasis on vision. Concern was expressed by some members of the Panel that the Year of Celebration events were concentrated in the historic core and a number of key events, such as Rowhedge Regatta, were not included. The Town Deal and Levelling Up Funding were largely devoted to the historic centre and were not being used to address long standing problems outside the city centre, such as flooding in the Hythe.

The Strategic Director accepted the point in respect of rural communities and they met regularly with town and parish clerks. Considerable effort was made to engage with rural communities and other groups, such as young people, and to ensure that the benefits were felt across the wider city. In terms of the Year of Celebration events were not being excluded. Organisers of events could ask for them to be included in the Schedule of Events, and communications had been sent out inviting events to be put forward for inclusion in the Year of Celebration.

It was also emphasised that the Policy Panel had taken the view that the Year of celebration and City Status should include the whole of the City and should not concentrate wholly on the historic city centre.

Members of the Panel suggested ways in which public engagement could be boosted such as through a competition building on the celebration jam being created by Wilkin and Sons, making the images of the public realm improvements available on the Council's website, and producing an online guide to the history of Colchester which could be accessed for those visiting historic and heritage sites.

The Executive Director Place stressed that the Council was working at pace in order to visualise and bring the proposals to life for residents through concepts such as an interactive map. The Council was looking to engage with a local company who could use modern technology in this way to promote the changes planned for the City Centre.

Members of the Panel explored whether the Council was seeking to learn from the experiences of Chelmsford and Southend. The significance of the 2040 date was also questioned and it was suggested that 2043 or 2049 would be more historically significant dates to mark. The Strategic Director explained that the Council had consulted with Chelmsford and Southend and was also linking in with the Key Cities Network. In view of the circumstances that had led to its award of City Status, Southend was taking a different, more reflective approach.

The Panel also discussed how the Council was developing the skills base in the city. Whilst the growth that was being seen was encouraging, the lack of skills was a real issue. Colchester had a low wage economy and the only way to change this was to improve the skills base. The Annual Monitoring Statement showed the slow improvement of skills and the consequent improvement in wage levels had been a theme for the last decade. It had also been identified as an issue in the current and previous Strategic Plan.

The Executive Director agreed that this was a central issue and highlighted that skills development was a key strand of the Council's Economic Strategy. The Health Alliance were looking at skills issues as they saw it as one of the key determinants of

health. It was frustrating that the Shared Prosperity Fund, from which Council had received funding, did not allow investment in skills until year 3. The devolving of responsibility for skills to a more local level was also a key issue in the devolution proposals currently being considered. It was suggested that the Scrutiny Panel could hold a one issue meeting on skills in the city in the new municipal year, to which relevant partners and guests could be invited to present and contribute.

In summary the Chair indicated that the report had been well received and indicated that it demonstrated that the work to build on the award of City Status was well underway, although it was noted that some of this work would have been undertaken notwithstanding the award. After considering the issues raised in the debate it was felt that the importance of a whole city approach should be stressed to Cabinet. There remained some concerns about the engagement with City Status in the rural areas of the city and of the benefits it would bring outside of the centre. Addressing the skills issue should also be a by-product of City Status and it was felt that the importance of this should be stressed to Cabinet. In addition the Panel considered that the City Status work was most effective when it concentrated on the practicalities and the delivery of specific plans and events, and that Cabinet should be encouraged to focus on that element.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) The plans and approach already underway for City Status be noted.
- (b) The Panel's Work Programme for 2023-24 include a one item meeting on issues relating to the skills base within the city, with relevant partners invited to attend.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET that:-

- (a) A Whole City approach be taken to the work on City Status to ensure that all residents feel involved and were able to take part in the Year of Celebration and that the benefits of City Status were felt across the whole city area.
- (b) The improvement of the skills base within the city be an essential part of City Status.
- (c) There be a greater emphasis and focus on detailed practical and deliverable plans and targets.



To aid the Cabinet's consideration of the Scrutiny Panel's recommendation the current Schedule of Events for the Year of Celebration is set out below.

Date	Event Name	Type	Venue
Feb	Big Women	Art	firstsite
Feb	Minories Pottery Fair	Art	Minories
Feb	London Mozart Players	Musical	Mercury
March	Bury Me In Colchester Mud	Theatre/Heritage	Arts Centre
March	They Don't Pay? We Won't Pay!	Theatre	Mercury
March	City Celebration – Royal Charters	Online Exhibition	City Museums
March	The Story of Britain's 1 st Town Wall	CAT Exhibition	Minories Galleries
March	Col Art Society Spring Exhibition	Art Exhibition	Cuckoo Farm Studios
April	Around the World In 80 Days	Theatre	Mercury
April	Dino Discovery Day	Youth Fun	Colchester Zoo
April	Sculpture Trail	Sculpture Exhibition	Fingringhoe Wick NR
May	Great Expectations	Theatre	Mercury
May	Jane's Walk Colchester	Community Walking	Various
May	Ride London Classique	Cycle Race	Various
May	Zoobilee	Family Fun	Colchester Zoo
June	Medieval & Oyster Fayre	Heritage	Castle Park
June	Essex Summer Opera Festival	Musical / Festival	Layer Marney
June	Colchester Food and Drink Festival	Festival	Castle Park
June	Zoo's Big Birthday Bash	Family Fun	Colchester Zoo
July	Gladiators - A Day At The Roman Games	Exhibition/Heritage	Castle Museum
July	Youth Take Over	Youth Arts Day	Mercury
July	Rowhedge Regatta	Maritime Fun	Rowhedge
July	Colchester Garden Festival	Festival	Various
July	Unbelievable	Theatre	Mercury
July	Colchester Roman Festival	Re-enactment Fun	Castle Park
August	West Mersea Town Regatta	Regatta / Festival	Mersea Island
August	Colchester Siege Spectacular	Commemoration	City Centre & Park
August	Olly Murs	Musical	Castle Park
August	Colchester Pride	Festival Fun	Firstsite
Sept	Invasion Colchester	Festival / Retail	City Centre
Sept	Heritage Open Days	Heritage	Various
Sept	Eco Festival	Festival Fun	Castle Park
Sept	Colchester Soapbox Rally	Kart Race/Family	High Street
Oct	Colchester Fringe Festival	Festival	Various sites

