

Local Plan Committee

Monday, 03 April 2023

Attendees: Councillor Michelle Burrows, Councillor Martin Goss, Councillor Richard Kirkby-Taylor, Councillor Jocelyn Law, Councillor Sam McLean, Councillor Patricia Moore, Councillor Kayleigh Rippingale, Councillor Paul Smith

Apologies: Councillor Lewis Barber, Councillor William Sunnucks

Substitutes: Councillor Darius Laws (for Councillor Lewis Barber), Councillor Andrew Ellis (for Councillor William Sunnucks)

266 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting held on the 6 February 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

267 Have Your Say! (Hybrid Council meetings)

Richard Martin addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The speaker questioned how Biodiversity net gain would work and measured and queried whether this would be measured including the species, and the destruction and displacement of habitat. The speaker detailed that there was no Noah's Ark prepared for transporting the animals from sites with regards to Middlewick and detailed that a lot of time and effort had gone into misleading facts and decreasing amounts of waste and that some of the proposals were not possible. The speaker concluded by asking whether the Ecology Officer role at the Council had been recruited to, when the person had started, and that whether £50,000 had been used for the designated Ecology study at Middlewick and would this now include the hundred species that had been missed off the original survey.

At the request of the Chair Sandra Scott, Place Strategy Manager, responded to the points raised by the previous speaker. The Committee heard that Biodiversity Net Gain and the Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on this issue was being provided in advance of its mandatory introduction later in the year and confirmed that the Ecology Officer role at the Council had been advertised twice and without success and that advertising via alternate routes was being investigated. The Officer concluded by confirming that the aforementioned £50,000 was still in the budget and was working towards master planning which would include the ecology and independent evidence.

Jean Quinn addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that they were representing the Colchester Cycle Campaign and congratulated the Council on its leadership and the radical plan that was being put into place considering the concern that was being raised around air pollution which was being addressed in the proposed masterplan.

The Committee heard that the Low Traffic Zones for St Botolph's and Southway were welcomed and it was noted that the connectivity on cycle paths on East Hill to the sixth form college could be improved.

Sir Bob Russell addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that the proposed masterplan was flawed and incomplete detailing that no business would proceed with the plan which included the closure of public car parks and questioned how much this would cost the public purse. The speaker added that they were disappointed that no Officers who worked on the masterplan were present at the meeting. The Committee heard that this was a full-frontal attack on the people who came into Colchester and who travel from within a 25-mile radius and that the Council should be included within the report. The speaker noted that it was unrealistic that there would be a threefold increase in the number of cycle journeys and an increased use in bus journeys but there was no mention of car usage. The speaker concluded by detailing that the St Johns car park may be closed and that it would cause more congestion in the centre of Colchester noting that the Masterplan was not fit for purpose.

At the request of the Chair, Simon Cairns, Development Manager, responded to the points raised by the previous speaker and confirmed that he had worked on the Masterplan that was before the Committee and the document had to be read in a holistic manner and could not be viewed in isolation. It was noted that the plan had been drawn together by officers and consultants who had a wide range of skills including in the economy and urban design and asked the Committee and those present that the decision before them was to consider the promotion of the document for public engagement so that further comments could be received. The Development Manager confirmed that the Masterplan was not an attack on car users and that the document did intend to promote cycling but also to promote visitors to access the Roman Circus and Southway so that the historic centre of the city could be knitted back together. The Committee heard that these matters could be looked at in the debate but that this would be built on public engagement and that technical questions could be answered by the Essex County Council Highways Officers who were attending via Zoom.

The Chair outlined that the press could not always be believed when it came to facts and outlined that the Development Manager had detailed that this was the beginning of the journey being put out for consultation and that other details that had been discussed were already included in the agreed local plan.

Sir Bob Russell responded to the comments of the Development Manager and Chair under provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that they had been a Councillor for New Town Ward for 31 years and the issue of St Botolph's roundabout had never been raised as an issue and detailed and commented that the consultants that worked on the masterplan were not in attendance at the meeting and detailed that only 5 % of people journeyed to Colchester by bike as opposed to 66% via car. The speaker concluded by outlining that the masterplan by virtue of removing the car was an attack on the viability on City Centre and commented that some of those in attendance had travelled by car to the Town Hall and that space syntax should be binned.

Nicholas Chilvers addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard about the consultations on Middlewick and asked about the oversight of the engagement process including Parish Council's. It was outlined that there needed to be better communication between Essex County Council's Highways Department who local people did not have faith in. The Committee were asked whether the new residents of Middlewick would be able to pay their mortgages as there was no new employment land coming forward. The speaker concluded that Essex County Council's Highways Department either couldn't or won't increase capacity in the network and that if jobs were not improved there would be high unemployment.

At the request of the Chair, Sandra Scott, Place Strategy Manager responded to the points that had been raised by the speaker. The Committee heard that the consultation would be a critical part of the work undertaken on Middlewick and that there was a need for an engagement plan to ensure that community engagement was taking place and would designate how the Council engaged with local residents and that officers would welcome any suggestions on this.

Nicholas Chilvers responded to the comments of the Development Manager and Chair under provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that residents should also look to their local Councillors.

Councillor Dave Harris addressed the Committee as a visiting Councillor. The Committee heard that the masterplan had to address what was lacking and missing within the local area and should not be so weak that it becomes a tick box exercise. If this was the case, the Committee heard that it would be selling out the people of Colchester. The Councillor detailed that they regretted abstaining on the vote for the local plan and detailed that the master planning process needed to be strong and which would involve the relevant ward members. The visiting Councillor concluded by detailing that all Councillors needed to get involved to make it as strong as possible.

The Chair responded to the speaker thanking them for their comments and the valid points that had been raised and detailed that Middlewick allocation in the adopted Local Plan was wrapped up in pages of conditions and had been approved by the Planning Inspectorate. The Chair confirmed that they agreed with the Councillor with regards to infrastructure and Councillor involvement.

In response to the Comments from the Chair, Councillor Harris detailed that there was a review process in the Local Plan which had to be completed within 5 years and asked the Committee to consider looking at replacements for Middlewick so that there wasn't a hole in the Local Plan.

At the request of the Chair the Place Strategy Manager confirmed that the Local Plan would have to be reviewed within 5 years and as the Council had two sections within the plan this would influence the timeframe for reviews. The Place Strategy Manager confirmed that a date had not yet been set for a review.

Councillor Chris Pearson addressed the Committee as a visiting Councillor. The Committee heard that the Middlewick area that had been proposed for development should be gifted to the City as a nature reserve. It was noted that the Councillor did not share the same concern as Sir Bob Russell about the Masterplan as it was not the final document and that there were lots of positive proposals within the document. The

Committee heard that the proposals offered safer routes for pedestrians like those that had been implemented in Chelmsford and Chester and added that the proposals showed a positive way for the City to present its history. The speaker endorsed the comments that had been made by Jean Quinn regarding cycling and commenting on how the Capital of Denmark had expansive cycle routes through it. The Committee heard that times were changing, and the car would not be king forever and commented how St Botolph's and Southway could be greatly improved. The speaker concluded by detailing that the proposal was a positive plan for the city centre.

Councillor Lee Scordis addressed the Committee as a visiting Councillor. The Committee heard that there was a need for masterplanning with regards to Middlewick and that options being brought forward should be guided by Councillors and asked those in attendance to bear in mind that the site had not been sold yet and could be reviewed in the future. The speaker concluded by detailing that the plans coming forward for Middlewick had yet to be confirmed.

At the request of the Chair the Place Strategy Manager detailed that they would welcome discussing they would welcome discussions on that area at the appropriate time.

Sam Good addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that the Business Improvement District (BID) supported some elements of the proposals but felt that it would have a negative impact and if implemented in full would increase the number of empty properties in the City centre. Members heard that the content of the Masterplan was not positive for retail and major chains and that car usage was up with the park and ride providing an inadequate service. The speaker detailed that the planned blocking of private car use would push workers to other towns and cities and confirmed that the BID would like to see a detailed delivery plan that would not remove car parks. The speaker concluded by asking that this was not agreed and put forward so quickly so as to be fixed by Essex County Council and Colchester City Council at a later date.

The Chair responded to the speaker and outlined that the BID was an important stakeholder and that this was the beginning of the journey so things could change along the way.

In response to the Comments from the Chair the speaker confirmed that a nationwide workers survey detailed that the methods of transport that were least used were bus and park and ride which needed fixing but confirmed that cycling had its place for shorter journeys.

Nicholas Chilvers addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that the Masterplan was a weighty report and outlined that it did not show much understanding of how people lived their lives with the aspiration of owning their own car and having a space to park it. The speaker explained that Colchester was not a hipster-based economy and

would have social stresses with people abandoning the city centre if parking was not available nearby. The Committee heard that Britannia car park was three quarters full on the day of the meeting but not all people are happy with multi storey car parking.

The speaker concluded by asking whether the report authors had made too many assumptions, that the proposal did nothing for levelling up and would cause more division between the haves and the have nots.

Dorian Kelly addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee were congratulated on identifying the urgent need for the Council to undertake work in this area but detailed that there some serious omissions in the document The speaker outlined that the legally enforceable style of the city and where this would cover as this had been raised with regards to the city's tourism aims. Furthermore, it was queried how this would affect new frontages and gated areas. The speaker concluded by asking whether this would create a policy conflict from approving this.

At the request of the Chair the Place Strategy Manager detailed that there should not be any policy conflict or issues that were anticipated to arise but that these could be brought out in the consultation.

In response to the comments from the Place Strategy Manager the speaker queried how the consultation was going to take place.

Simon Cairns, Development Manager detailed that the bespoke designs had yet to be completed but confirmed that there would be a four-week consultation as well as a drop in facility allowing people to comment and make representations. Councillor Mark Goacher addressed the Committee as a visiting Councillor. The visiting Councillor thanked Officers for the document but detailed their disappointment that St John's Car park had been listed for improvement and asked that it be fixed once and for all. The speaker confirmed that they were aware that this was for a consultation but asked that the enhancement of heritage was given priority and not just the Roman history but the medieval history of the City and the Civil War. The Committee heard that they shared some of the same concerns as Sam Good from the BID and raised concern about the bus stations, which they did not think was acceptable, but confirmed that they liked the idea of the shuttle bus. They raised concern that more cars would be encouraged to use areas like Stoke Park and that a wider view was needed to see how public transport would be improved noting that not everyone was able to cycle.

At the request of the Chair Simon Cairns detailed that the City Centre and the area around the bus station was spatially constrained but confirmed that more work needed to be done to connect transport links.

Councillor David King addressed the Committee as a visiting Councillor. The Committee heard that the document that was before the Committee had been based on discussions, workshops, and consultations that had taken place and confirmed that this was the start of a much bigger process noting that Colchester was a city with towns inside it. The Leader of the Council asked Members to pass the proposal to the next stage and go out to consultation on the proposal and confirmed that this was not

an attack on the car or businesses. The Committee heard that this would not attack the Council's budget either and would bring vitality to the area through different forms of transport and would attract people to the modern ancient city. The visiting Councillor detailed that this was thoughtful work, and that people would rightly complain about doing things piecemeal in the past but that the proposal is about regeneration and balancing the needs of residents, heritage concerns and transport links whilst supporting businesses. The speaker concluded by describing that the work had specific opportunities in it and asked that it be approved.

Councillor Adam Fox addressed the Committee as a visiting Councillor. The Committee heard that the proposal before Members was a fantastic start to develop how the City centre develops into the future and that it was positive for the City Council and County Council working together to improve the quality of life for residents. The visiting Councillor agreed with the comments made by Dorian Kelly and that the City wanted to attract graduates who wanted to stay in the area and support the local economy as well as creating opportunities for local people. They confirmed that the agenda was not to block private ownership of the car or reducing car parking capacity noting that the rapid transit system would be supporting journeys. The Committee heard that there was so much to build on in Colchester in terms of galleries, retail, flagship stores and independent shops and making these all accessible for disabled residents and tourists whilst allowing private investment into the area. The speaker concluded that they had found the other views that had been raised interesting but that they could comment on the proposals if the recommendation was agreed by the Committee.

Councillor Lee Scordis addressed the Committee as a visiting Councillor. The speaker thanked all staff and consultants for their work on the Masterplan and detailed that they didn't agree with some of the views mentioned earlier regarding staff and consultants being present. The Committee heard that they were concerned that the conversation had become too focussed on cars and that there were provisions in the Local Plan with regards to this. The Committee heard that the speaker thought that there needed to be change as retailers didn't rent in the High Street anymore and used other areas of the City. The speaker detailed that the consultation would allow for those who had different ideas to bring them forward and to submit them to the consultation whilst reminding Members that some of the elements that had been discussed were outside of the Council's remit.

A series of presentations were given outlining the Masterplan whose contents included:

- The key areas where works would be undertaken of: The High Street, Southway and St John's Street/ Osborne Street, the former bus station site, Britannia Yard, Vineyard Gate, and St Botolph's junction.
- The timeframe for delivery with the report from the consultation coming back in the autumn/ winter of 2023 to the Local Plan Committee.
- That the vision for Colchester would be phased with proposals coming forward over the next 5, 10 and 20 years.
- The different zones that Colchester was broken down into
- The corridors and gateways that served the City Centre
- The list of interventions that would be included in the Masterplan and how they had been grouped.

- The current uptake of bus use and the declining level of bus journeys taking place as well as the bus services running to and from the City Centre
 - A separate presentation was shown regarding the works to be undertaken at St Botolph's junction which outlined that it was the priority junction that needed to be altered. The alterations detailed that a new active friendly junction including the removal of subways and Improved public realm areas. The proposal would overcome severance issues and would promote walking and cycling with shared mobility for short local journeys from south and east urban areas. It was noted that the proposal would improve safety and reduce crime and anti-social behaviour as well as improve heritage assets in the area.
 - The presentation showed that the roundabout would be removed with the proposal seeking to increase and improve bus interchange spaces on streets and by St Botolph's as well as prioritising core bus movements as well as reclaiming some space for other uses. Additionally it showed the active travel movements on desire lines which crossed Southway.
 - It was envisaged that the improvements would be implemented in 2025 and that further improvements would take place post 2026.
- A short break was taken between 19:55-20:00

Members debated the use of a style guide for the area and how a harmonious destination could be ensured especially in the High Street as well as how transport links including a shuttle bus and bus station could be created and improved. Some Members felt that the proposals would slow down traffic at Balmerne Hill and that there was not enough provision for coach parking for tourist trips.

At the request of the Chair the Development Manager responded that a harmonious design could be created through the Council's policies and whilst working with the BID and other partners. The Committee heard that the joining up the heritage assets in the City Centre would be a key benefit and that layover spaces for busses may not be possible in the centre, but the Council could work with bus companies to see what options were available. The Principal Transportation and Infrastructure Planner added that extra bus stops could be added to the City Centre as required and that the changes to Southway would allow the controlled flow of traffic with more attractive surface crossings with the rapid transit system being the backbone of the future transport in Colchester.

Members queried whether roundabouts would be included in the proposals with Members agreeing that the bus system did need looking at but there was concern that there would not be enough safe cycleways to promote cycling in the area. The Principal Transportation and Infrastructure Planner detailed that roundabouts would be utilised where they were appropriate.

Members debated the safeguarding of sight lines especially views of jumbo and that there was no mention of safety for residents. Some Members detailed that there needed to be a contraflow system on the High Street for cyclists and that the concerns for heritage loss needed to have further information added with some Members voicing disappointment that there was no bus improvement plan. The Development Manager detailed that any contraflow cycleway would be under the purview of Essex County Council but that officers would take this away and find out if anything further could be done.

Members continued to debate the proposal on the issues including: the current state of retail in the City Centre and how the Masterplan could regenerate some elements, whether a space could be dedicated to box parks and startups, how the City Centre could be converted to support businesses in terms of the changing economy of click and collect, how air quality could be improved as well as what safety measures there were to protect residents. The Chair detailed that there was some interest in the former Debenhams and Marks and Spencer shops being used for new retail purposes. The Development Manager detailed that diversified uses created a vibrant economy and that a safe space in the City Centre was part of the Masterplan. It was noted that air quality would improve if less journeys were made via public transport but also through the routes of traffic.

Some Members detailed that they were excited to see the plans presented and that this was part of the Council's City Status and as such needed to be an accessible and inclusive environment and that there were a range of transport options and asked that the consultation reach all groups and members of the community. The Development Manager responded that the consultation if agreed would be accessible with offline resources being available as well as detailing that the intention would be that the document be adaptable and agile.

Members sought assurance that blue badge holders would be taken into consideration so that the City Centre would remain accessible as well as detailing issues around busses and how the cost of parking effected bus ticket prices as there was a need for family friendly pricing. Members expressed disappointment that the current state of busses made it uneconomical for some to travel into the City Centre via bus as well as the wider Colchester area.

Members concluded the debate by discussing the consultation with some Members expressing disappointment that some speakers had missed the point of the document which had received cross party support in its development. The Chair detailed their concern on how the document had been represented in the media and conflated by others and confirmed that there was no congestion charge, no plans for a 15-minute city or locking people in their areas.

RESOLVED (UNANIMOUSLY) that the Committee approve the publishing of the draft City Centre Masterplan for public consultation in accordance with the Planning Regulations and Statement of Community Involvement.