

POLICY PANEL

16 June 2021

Attendees: Councillors Chillingworth, Cox, Goacher, Hayter, Jowers, Leatherdale, McCarthy, Pearson and Scott-Boutell.

Substitutes: None.

Also Present: Councillor Dundas

18. Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 3 March 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

19. Have Your Say!

Mr Nick Chilvers attended and addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) to ask that the Council push for levelling up of the South of Colchester, which should follow the expected infrastructure audit that had been signalled at a previous Cabinet meeting by Councillor Andrew Ellis, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning.

Mr Chilvers argued that areas like Shrub End had fewer employers and worse infrastructure than other areas, whilst it had large and increasing amounts of housing, along with other built-up areas across South Colchester. Improvements in services and infrastructure in the North were referenced and similar were requested for the South. This was argued to be a way to prevent increases in crime.

Mr Chilvers requested that 'levelling up of South Colchester' be added to the Policy Panel's work programme.

The Panel responded to the arguments made by Mr Chilvers. This included agreement that there needed to be equality of opportunity across Colchester, and a view expressed by one member that the planned infrastructure audit would be a good idea and that this should include measures of accessibility of services, work opportunities and environmental measures, such as air quality.

Addressing Mr Chilvers' points regarding improving South Colchester, suggestions included seeking ways to protect Middlewick Ranges, a Southern relief road, greening of more public spaces and repairing of river/waterway fronts.

Clarification was asked as to whether the Panel had the power to recommend such an audit to Cabinet, whether Mr Chilvers would need to make this recommendation

directly to Cabinet, what overall powers the Panel had and whether it could seek to change its terms of reference.

Councillor Paul Dundas, Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Leader of the Council, attended and, with the permission of the Chairman, addressed the Panel. The Leader agreed that the Council had a responsibility to help 'level up' local areas. £18m Town Deal funding had already been received and more bids for funding were being made. Plans were being made to bid for a further £20m, and in cooperation with Essex County Council, further bids for around £50m.

Regarding the terms of reference for the Policy Panel, the Leader explained that the public could speak at any committee or at Full Council to give their views, and to bring forward initiatives to suggest. The new terms of reference for the Policy Panel had been drafted so as to show that Cabinet had confidence in the Panel and its work.

There was concern raised that the newly changed terms of reference for the Policy Panel had removed the parts which specifically noted that members of the public could bring initiatives up for consideration and seemed to indicate that the Panel would only be able to consider items at the direction of Cabinet. Members spoke to underline the importance of ensuring that the public had a platform for being heard and urged a change in the terms of reference to re-introduce the ability to engage with the public and consider public initiatives. Members were also keen to explore issues of concern to them and their residents, such as the future of Middlewick Ranges, possibilities for improved transport links and green spaces and repairing of river banks and other public areas.

A member argued that the Panel should have more scope to scrutinise policies, in addition to ensuring that public initiatives be considered. It was hoped that Cabinet would be open and receptive to suggestions for different approaches.

It was agreed that further discussion of the Panel's terms of reference would be best conducted as part of the following item, 'Work Programme 2021-22'.

20. Work Programme 2021-22

The Panel considered a report on its work programme for 2021-22.

The Leader of the Council gave assurances that Cabinet would look favourably on any requests by the Panel to examine issues, and that the public could still come to the Panel to raise their views and ideas. The Leader raised Cabinet's wish for the Panel to engage with the public, such as with looking at options for a Covid memorial for those who lost their lives, and to pay tribute to key workers. Other areas in which the Panel could work with the public are in finding ways to support parish councils' work, exploring options for Platinum Jubilee celebrations. It was recommended that the Panel leave some space in their work programme so it could be reactive and add items as they come to prominence.

The Panel discussed its concerns regarding its amended terms of reference. It was noted that the old terms had specifically included a term relating to the proactive identification of issues and that these could be taken to Cabinet for approval to

examine them. The Panel discussed ways in which the Council had previously engaged with the public. It was argued by one member of the Panel that, with a certain punctuation, the terms of reference would give the Panel the power to be proactive in putting forward work programme suggestions for approval, including issues of a more significant nature than had been so far suggested for this year's work programme.

A Panel member requested that there be a standing item on each agenda to allow for ideas to be brought forward for requesting to be added to the Panel's work programme. A further Panel member queried whether the changes to the terms of reference represented a centralisation of power to what has become a smaller Cabinet. It was questioned whether the Panel should be able to add items to its work programme without needing to seek Cabinet agreement first, and whether public initiatives could be put to Cabinet to approve for Panel consideration.

A further view given was that the panel had worked very well in identifying and discussing issues and that there should not be the presumption that Cabinet knows best. A two-way dialogue was argued for between the Panel and Cabinet; the Leader was asked for a degree of flexibility in the operation of the Panel and its work programme, otherwise debate and initiative would be stifled.

The Leader emphasised that the change in terms of reference was intended to simplify the Panel's operation, not to stifle it. If the Panel requested permission to look at something, Cabinet would look favourably on such requests. He underlined his view of the importance of preserving the Panel's ability to look at issues in depth and detail.

It was queried how the Panel's terms of reference, which had been set and agreed at Full Council, could be changed. It was noted that the Panel did not have the power to change its own terms of reference, but the comments from the Leader regarding flexibility in the Panel's operation were welcomed. There was reassurance for some members in what the Leader had said regarding the Panel being able to continue to work with Cabinet, suggesting work programme items for Cabinet approval. The Leader signalled his willingness to discuss the terms of reference and suggestions for amendments intended to clarify them and underlined his wish for the Panel to focus on issues where positive Council action was possible, rather than issues where nothing could be done.

RESOLVED that the work programme would be amended so that the Panel would consider Covid memorial options on 4 August 2021, Grounds maintenance contract on 22 September 2021 and the Platinum Jubilee on 24 November.