

SCRUTINY PANEL

14 December 2021

Present: -

Councillor Cory (Chair)
Councillor Barton, Councillor Loveland, Councillor
Whitehead, Councillor Willetts, Councillor Wood

Substitutions: -

Councillor Fox for Councillor Bourne, Councillor
Barber for Councillor Chapman

Also present: -

Councillor Dundas, Councillor Lissimore,
Councillor B Oxford

322. Minutes of previous meeting

The Panel were informed that three typographical errors within the minutes published in the agenda for this meeting had been identified and corrected.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 9 November 2021 be approved as a correct record.

323. Portfolio Holder Briefing from Councillor Lissimore [Resources and Deputy Leader]

Councillor Lissimore, Portfolio Holder for Resources, and Deputy Leader of the Council, provided a briefing on the highlights of her work over the past six months. The decision to remove content (relating to a Colchester Youth Zone) from the draft 2022-23 Budget and Medium-Term Financial Forecast was defended, and the possibility of its potential future inclusion, should the necessary additional funding be found, was confirmed.

The Portfolio Holder explained that Locality Budgets were being returned to their original levels and that she supported the holding of a future review to see if the scheme could be improved.

The four-year funding set for local arts organisation was highlighted to address the need to give stable funding and financial certainty to those organisations.

The Portfolio Holder detailed the inflationary pressures which were currently high but were forecast to drop to around two percent by the end of 2023, and the Council's approach to service charges in the light of financial challenges caused by Covid-19. A high percentage continued to be achieved regarding rates of Council tax collection, whilst the Local Council Tax Support Scheme continued to support lower-income households. Government support funding had meant that the Council had needed to use less of its reserves than had been expected.

Efforts to increase sustainable travel, and work to reduce printing and travel costs, were covered. This also contributed to the Council's work to reduce its emissions.

The Portfolio Holder gave a brief update to explain that the Town Deal programme was proceeding, and that the Council was carrying out improvements to its estate management.

The Portfolio Holder was asked to give examples as to what actions had been taken to save money. The Panel was informed that the Portfolio Holder had looked at the 2021-22 spending proposals. Some were approved to remain, whilst others were rejected.

The Tree Planting Policy had been examined and was to be changed in order to ensure the highest possible rates of survival for trees planted. It was admitted that the changes had not resulted in a saving, but rather had used the planting budget more effectively.

An estimated £140k for renovation and changes to rooms at the Town Hall, including the provision of extra facilities for elected members. It was argued that any assessment of councillors' working practices and needs should wait until the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic had passed. A debate was conducted on the exact nature of the Town Hall changes which had been planned, and which included improvements to working areas for officers, some of which had already been carried out. The Portfolio Holder stated that she had discussed the situation with officers and elected members and that no great need for change had been raised. A member of the Scrutiny Panel noted that there had been talk by members about the desirability of more cross-party opportunities for them to talk outside of, and before, formal meetings.

The Portfolio Holder was asked if there had been any progress on holding an estate review, as suggested by the Scrutiny Panel in 2020-21. The Panel were told that the Rowan House upgrades and renovations were now going ahead. The Council effectively reviewed its estates and offices, adapting to reflect changing needs. The Council also used space in the Community 360 Town Centre Hub for face-to-face contact with the public. Future working practices and office needs weren't possible to predict at this time, but spaces needed to be provided for those who could not work from home.

A Panel member agreed that Council assets needed to be sweated and noted that office space was to be rented by the County Council. The Portfolio Holder was asked whether new ways had been found to get more from Council assets. The Portfolio Holder stated that the Council needed to be innovative and that assets could be developed by the Council for different purposes, such as rental office space or new residential properties. An example of partnership working was how Essex Housing worked with local authorities and other partners in developing assets. The Council could potentially work with them in the future. A suggestion from a Panel member was to see if the Council could take on assets from the County Council in order to maximise their potential and find ways to both save and make money.

A member of the Panel raised the increases in inflation, cost of living, and in National Insurance [from April 2022], and the constriction of household incomes, and stated that a Government review indicated that Council Tax levels would rise by 9% by 2024-25. The Portfolio Holder was asked at what balance she felt that levels of Council Tax should be set and argued that she wanted Council Tax levels to be minimized, but realistic. The Council Tax Support Scheme continued to support those most vulnerable. Accessing the scheme was not a tick-box exercise; officers worked with applicants to go over their situations and provide information and advice. The Portfolio Holder argued that Government schemes provided support to low-income households.

In response to questioning, the Portfolio Holder explained that Cabinet was unable to put in significant plans to address wasteful spending until the Budget approval for 2022-23. The size of Cabinet had been reduced by one and further savings were to be found in the Budget which would be presented for approval at Full Council early in 2022. One Panel member argued that the lack of changes to the previous Administration's Budget for 2021-22 indicated that it had been an efficient budget. Another member asked for an indication of the savings from reducing the size of Cabinet.

The Portfolio Holder was asked whether there were data and an analysis of spending by Council ward and to identify allocations to deprived areas. In answer, the Panel was informed that such a breakdown would be difficult to give, as officers and programmes did not work on a ward-by-ward basis. The Portfolio Holder argued that councillors needed more power to identify who was responsible for addressing different issues and to report issues and problems. Money had been awarded to improve the functions which allowed elected members to report issues and the Portfolio Holder offered to provide what details she could to members of the Panel. The difficulties of data sharing were discussed. The Panel also noted that it would help if outcome information were to be provided on issues raised. It was confirmed that the additional funding from Government would help to improve this.

The Panel discussed Cabinet's views regarding Colchester Commercial Holdings Limited [CCHL] and whether there was appetite to allow it to branch out and market different services. The Panel were informed that Cabinet was looking to increase income and avoid cuts. Central Government was looking at changing the minimum revenue provisions and the Council awaited the effects of this. Cabinet would look to the new Chief Executive to provide commercial leadership so that income could be maximised, but charges and fees minimized.

The Panel asked for information as to how the 'customer' experience of Council service users was being developed, and as to what Cabinet was doing to understand what service users wanted and adapt services to best fit this. The Portfolio Holder explained that the access point at the C360 Town Centre Hub would help residents contact the Council on their terms, if digital contact was not possible or preferable. The commitment to providing the best service possible was underlined.

The Panel asked, with regard to the £120m Capital Programme, what was needed to address the two projects rated as 'red' and 25 as 'amber' and get these back on track, meeting any overspends. The Portfolio Holder posited that strong, well-worded

contracts could protect the Council from overspend costs incurred by its contractors. Joint working with partners such as the County Council was highlighted as being necessary for projects to succeed. The Portfolio Holder noted that some projects that relied upon partnership working were commercially sensitive and so could not be discussed in open session of the Panel. Regarding questions as to where the necessary extra £300k funding needed for the new Highwoods Community Centre could be sourced, information could be collated and provided to Panel members following the meeting.

The Panel discussed the terms used to refer to residents, with a Panel member noting that many disliked being called 'customers' of the Council. Differences were highlighted between users of the Council's statutory services (or where there were no alternative providers) and customers of the Council's commercial services, such as those at Leisure World.

In discussion of the costs of the Council's political processes, the Portfolio Holder argued that planning and decision making was more difficult where annual elections were held, and when leadership of the Council changed hands. Holding quadrennial elections of the whole Council once every four years was suggested as a way to allow administrations to draft and pursue four-year business plans.

RESOLVED that the Panel had carried out scrutiny of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Deputy Leader of the Council.

324. Half Year April 2021 – September 2021 Performance Report Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and Other Performance News

Councillor Dundas, Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Leader of the Council, joined Richard Block, Assistant Director (Corporate and Improvement), to present the report and answer questions.

A Panel member highlighted an interest in key performance indicators where public expectations and views might differ from those of the Council, such as the indicator relating to new housing provided within the Borough. The Leader agreed that there could be issues where performance was far in excess of target, such as in housebuilding rates, and suggested that it was best to look at a three- or four-year average for such KPIs, to account for fluctuation.

It was queried whether there could be a performance indicator to measure Council success regarding defence of appealed planning decisions. The Leader stated that the Council was beholden to decisions made by its Planning Committee, and the grounds given for refusals. For some major applications, Section 106 [Town and Country Planning Act 1990] issues seemed to be causing delays, including highways and funding issues.

A member of the Panel noted that waste and recycling was considered to be a fundamental service offered by the Council and that KPI K1W2 [Household waste reused, recycled and composted] was marginally below target. The Leader was asked why waste collections had dropped, composting reduced and residual waste increased. The Leader was also asked to explain what was being done to improve

performance in this area. The Leader explained that there had now been widespread changes to the working practices around residual waste collection and queried whether the KPI target was still realistic, given the increase in home working and household waste, whilst trade waste levels had diminished. This was one of several KPIs identified as needing review in light of changes caused by Covid-19. The scarcity of HGV drivers was raised as an issue which could lead to difficulties in waste collection, but the Leader praised the success achieved by the Council in retaining driving staff and emphasised the perks of working for the Council. Work hours continued to be lost to illness, including Covid-19, and from officers having to isolate when required. Officers were praised for doing sterling work in tough circumstances.

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager (Neighbourhood Services) provided additional details on waste collection method changes. The initial changes had been agreed during 2020 and further refining was carried out in 2021 to match Government guidance, including changes to limits on bag numbers per household. The Council had been lenient on bag numbers during 2020 but had moved to advising and educating service users where necessary during 2021. It was explained that the KPI K1W1 [Residual Household Waste per Household] was cumulative, which meant that it was difficult to bring it back in line with target performance in the latter part of a year where performance difficulties had been experienced early in the year. KPI K1W2 [Household waste reused, recycled and composted] was moving closer to target, due in part to efforts to change resident behaviours. The Environment Act 2021 would mean further changes would be needed, and officers were committed to supporting residents through these and offer encouragement individually and via media options.

The Panel were informed that the Waste and Recycling Strategy was being reviewed and was expected to come before the Environment and Sustainability Panel in February 2022. The Group Manager stressed that it was essential for the Council to be open to innovative and simple actions which could reduce waste and improve recycling rates.

The Group Manager gave assurance that staff were being supported to maximise health and wellbeing in healthy workplaces. Some officers had needed to be redeployed to cover gaps in service areas, but this had been done carefully so as to minimise disruption. In response to questions regarding rising levels of short- and long-term sickness, the Leader agreed that analysis, by service area, would be useful to look at issues such as those from 'Long Covid'. Richard Block, Assistant Director (Corporate and Improvement), explained that some long-term sickness cases could have been 'hidden' earlier in the year, where individuals were isolating or shielding. 'Long Covid' cases were being identified and those affected were being supported.

The Panel discussed the need to ensure that KPIs and targets were useful in driving performance improvements, reflected changes in circumstances and were sufficiently sophisticated to capture all relevant performance data.

The Panel discussed ways in which performance relating to homelessness duty owed could be effectively presented, with the difficulty experienced when trying to

set this alongside other KPIs, given that for this KPI no meaningful target could be set. A Panel member asked if it would make sense to show number of homelessness preventions as a percentage of total cases, and whether it would make sense to set a KPI relating to numbers in temporary accommodation, to press for a reduction in this. The Leader agreed that it was important to discuss what the Homelessness Duty Owed KPI could tell the Council [KPI K1H3] and agreed that the level of use of temporary accommodation was also important, given the implications for residents and the effect it had on increasing budget pressures for the Council. Richard Block, Assistant Director (Corporate and Improvement), clarified that homelessness measures had been brought in to reflect the requirements within the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and suggested that this would be an area of interest for the Panel to consider in the coming municipal year. The Panel was due to consider the Council's draft corporate KPI targets for 2022-23 in early 2022.

The Leader was asked if anything could be done to address Council properties left in poor condition, thus causing lengthier times empty between tenancies whilst remedial work is done. The Leader suggested that this should be addressed by the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning but noted that the average time to re-let Council homes had improved since the previous year. The Assistant Director (Corporate and Improvement) explained that the length of time it takes to evict tenants who seriously damage properties had increased the damage done and the length of time needed to prepare the properties for new tenants.

A Panel member reasoned that, should the Local Plan be adopted, the default position would be that the number of new homes provided would increase. The Leader was asked how Cabinet might reduce this target, assuming that this remained an intention for them. The Leader contended that it would depend, in part, on the Local Plan Committee and that it was not guaranteed that housing targets would increase. The situation would be considered carefully, and a formal review would not be triggered without an idea of what Cabinet wished to see changed.

The Panel noted that performance was behind target on K1H1 [Additional Homes Provided] with the explanation being that some large developments were expected. The Leader was asked whether he saw new housing as being welcome. The Leader explained that a balance was needed, taking into consideration density, authority size, available infrastructure and other factors, arguing that it was widely thought that infrastructure provision had not kept up with increases in the numbers of homes in the Borough. It was emphasised that all new residents would be welcome in the Borough.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Panel had reviewed performance against Key Performance Indicators and, where Key Performance Indicators had not been met, that appropriate corrective action has been taken.

325. Half Year covering April 2021 to September 2021 Performance Report - 2020-2023 Strategic Plan Action Plan

Richard Block, Assistant Director (Corporate and Improvement), presented the report showing mid-year performance against the Strategic Plan Action Plan, which showed work carried out and progress made. Recommendations could be made by Scrutiny

Panel for Cabinet to consider when it considered this item on 26 January 2022. Councillor Dundas, Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Leader of the Council, highlighted that Cabinet had kept the themes from the last Administration's Strategic Plan Action Plan, and retained content where Cabinet agreed with it. A new waste bin policy had been developed and the Council had ordered new smart bins. A litter engagement campaign had been commenced and investments made in the Shrub End Depot. The Borough's population continued to increase, pushing an increase in pressure on waste collection services. Potential ways to expand trade waste services were being explored in order to raise Council income. A number of schemes had been commenced to draw more visitors to the area, including to visit heritage assets. These included schemes to improve parking in the area. The safety and security of local open spaces were a priority, with £50k put into looking at ways to improve them.

The Chairman praised the work of officers. The Leader was then asked what green initiatives had been brought in by his Administration, following on from those of the previous Administration. A Panel member also highlighted the information circulated regarding the vision for the River Colne and requested renewed focus on the River. The Leader deferred these questions to the Portfolio Holder into whose portfolio these matters fell, but could inform the Panel that the Haven Road flooding was caused because the one-way valve meant to prevent water flowing up and out of the drainage system was broken. Repairs had been effected by Anglia Water, which was now recommending that the Council and County Council contributed towards its maintenance in the future. New schemes would also be trialled to solve issues caused by fresh water not being able to drain when the valve was engaged, both rain water and flow from Distillery Pond.

The Leader was asked whether there was any information that could be provided regarding the Queen Street/Alumno project. The Panel was informed that a Town Centre Masterplan was to be drawn up with partners, such as Essex County Council, which could leverage more funding. It was expected that more information could be given in 2022.

A request was made to the Leader for more attention and better advertising to be carried out relating to heritage assets across the whole Borough, including rural sites as well as those in Colchester itself.

A Panel member asked the Leader how conflicts between policies in the Strategic Plan Action Plan were resolved, such as the conflict between efforts to ensure good insulation on new homes, and the target for new housing, when increased cost of building new properties would reduce the number of new homes. The priority of lowering emissions was contrasted with the decision to buy diesel vehicles for Council use due to electric vehicles having been found to be too costly at the present. The Leader agreed that there were always areas where compromises would be needed, such as between insulation quality and new housing numbers. Regarding Council vehicles, it was important that the right time was chosen for conversion to using electric vehicles. Certain previous renewals of Council leases could have been for shorter terms, to allow earlier replacement with electric vehicles.

The Panel discussed a recent motion to Council which related to residential property insulation, and the differing views on how to push for better insulation given when this had been debated. A Panel member urged the Administration to lobby central government for increased action upon this.

The Panel asked whether the target for new affordable homes was realistic. The Leader explained that 105 new units were expected to be built at the Mill Road site, which had experienced delays within the planning process. Housing allocation and requirements were laid out in the Local Plan.

Questions were asked regarding the environmental elements of the Strategic Plan, the Administration's views on rewilding and on the Head Street cycle lane. The Leader noted that he had not seen any criticism of rewilding work, but there had been issues raised in some areas where mowing was still scheduled but where problems had occurred in carrying this out. Councillor Lissimore, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Deputy Leader of the Council, confirmed that the Head Street cycle lane was to be removed as it was poorly used and took up road space, increasing congestion. This had meant to link up to a cycle lane on Butt Road, however that lane had not been carried out, so the system did not work as it had been intended. The Panel discussed this, and a view was given that it was a shame that a wider network of cycle lanes was not being installed. A Panel member also praised the secure bike storage in the Town centre and suggested that more ways to provide secure storage at car parks should be examined. The Leader agreed and informed the Panel that, in theory, it should also be possible to have storage points highlighted on google maps.

326. Work Programme 2021-22

The Panel were informed that the additional meeting requested for it to meet was now recommended to be scheduled for 22 February 2022.

In answer to questions relating to the work of the Panel's sub-group on Youth Zones, Owen Howell, Democratic Services Officer, confirmed that the sub-groups findings, and any recommendations, were scheduled to come before the Panel for consideration at its meeting on 25 January 2022, prior to Cabinet considering the draft 2022-23 Budget at its meeting on 26 January 2022.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Panel's Work Programme for 2021-22 be approved.