

Environment and Sustainability Panel

Tuesday, 22 March 2022

Attendees: Councillor Lewis Barber, Councillor Peter Chillingworth, Councillor Mark Cory, Councillor David King, Councillor Lee Scordis, Councillor Julie Young
Also Attending: Councillor Simon Crow
Apologies:
Substitutes:

61 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that: the amended minutes of the meeting held on 24 February 2022 be confirmed as a correct record.

62 Have Your Say!

Alex Stevenson attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with Colchester Borough Council (the Council)'s Have Your Say! provisions, and informed the Panel that she was particularly interested in the agenda items concerning the Recycling and Waste Strategy proposal, and community engagement. As someone who had campaigned against the Rivenhall incinerator, she was concerned at the emissions that would be generated by this site, which would be approximately 500,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year, which did not include the additional emissions which would be generated through the transportation of the waste to the site, and therefore considered that it was essential that the production of waste was tackled at its source. She considered that the Council should do all in its power to encourage producers to do all that they could to reduce the packaging that was produced in conjunction with their products. In addition to this, the provision of an education programme should be considered to help people make informed choices about the packaging they consumed, thereby reducing the need for recycling.

In respect of community engagement, the Panel was advised that the Council's efforts should be directed towards contacting residents who did not currently take an interest in environmental issues, as opposed to reaching those who were already engaged in the issues. It was considered that the Council should take advantage of research which had been carried out which demonstrated the economic value of the environment, as a method of achieving this engagement. Local authorities had a vital role to play in ensuring that future generations were able to enjoy the same lifestyle that residents were currently able to lead.

Councillor Young noted the request that Colchester Borough Council lead the way in terms of waste strategy, and pointed out that in the past the Council had been the only local authority in Essex which had refused to sign up to an inter-authority waste agreement which included incineration. Although the Council had been penalised financially for this decision at the time, it had since been shown to have been the right thing to do.

Mandy Jones, Assistant Director - Place and Client Services, confirmed that with regard to communication, consideration had been given recently to behavioural insights and how the Council needed to take into account research to try to encourage people to behave differently. This was on the Council's agenda for the future to ensure that it communicated effectively with all groups and types of people.

Recycling and Waste Strategy development proposal

Councillor Crow, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, attended the meeting and addressed the Panel. The Panel heard that the Waste and Recycling Service was a fundamental function of Colchester Borough Council (the Council), and it was vital that this was carried out correctly. In the seven years since the launch of the Council's current Waste Vision and Strategy, the population of Colchester had grown and the effects of lockdowns had changed the way that residents lived, worked and shopped. The changes which would be imposed by the Environment Act meant that it was now appropriate to review the Strategy to ensure that it reflected the Council's stated goals in supporting residents to reduce, reuse and recycle. The Strategy would be developed over the coming eighteen months with public engagement, and The Environment and Sustainability Panel would be invited to work closely with Officers during this time.

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager – Neighbourhood Services, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. Since the last Strategy had been implemented, the Council had performed very well and was ranked highly in the eastern region when compared to other councils in areas such as the amount of residual waste which was produced, and the volume of recycling undertaken by residents. The Panel heard that the Environment Act would impact the way in which the Council operated, and could impact collections and income from as early as 2023/2024. Additionally, Essex County Council were reviewing the Essex Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy (EJMWMS), and it was therefore timely that the Council consider a new Strategy.

It was proposed that the Council develop a vision containing a number of strategic objectives, leading towards 2030, which would align with the Climate Emergency Action Plan, and the transition of the Council's fleet to electric vehicles. The Strategy would be developed over three phases, and would be based on three key principles; the use of evidence and data as part of the decision making process, evaluation and the use of prototypes and pilots to give insights and aid in the development of the Strategy.

The project would take account of both strategic and operational drivers, which would include areas such as waste separation, increasing recycling rates, operational resilience and the simplification of service delivery. To ensure that the Strategy was robust, it would be tested against key areas of the service including environment, the public and operations. It was proposed that the Strategy be developed in accordance with five main objectives:

1. Value for money
2. Providing a safe, simple, compliant and resilient service
3. Have a community asset based approach
4. Minimise the impact on the environment

5. Be transformative

There would be three main phases of the development of the Strategy, taking place over an eighteen month programme which would be developed in more detail with the Panel as the project was launched. The Panel was being asked to agree the proposed approach's objectives, principles and testing.

Jason Searles, Head of Waste Policy and Circular Economy for Essex County Council, attended the meeting to address the Panel. The Panel heard that the Essex Waste Partnership was represented by all twelve local authorities in Essex and was currently working on the development of a new Joint Waste Strategy. This Strategy was necessary as waste collection in the county was an extremely complicated process, with actions taken by a single authority having a knock-on effect across the county. It was therefore important for authorities to work together to improve efficiency and reducing system conflict.

The EJMWS had been in effect since 2008, and although it had been successful in a number of key areas such as minimising waste, achieving high levels of recycling and composting and the expansion of kerbside collection services, it was no longer aligned with national policy and emerging legislation and regulations. Some of the key factors behind the need to review the EJMWS were the Environment Act, the increased need to tackle climate change, a greater desire on the part of businesses and the public to do more towards reducing waste, and an overall change in the nature of consumerism which needed to be reflected. Although initial early gains had been made in terms of the reduction in residual waste and an increase in recycling after the EJMWS had been introduced, these levels had now stabilised and a review was necessary to continue to produce improvements in these areas.

The process which was to be followed in reviewing the EJMWS was similar to that which has been adopted by the Council, and consideration was being given to the improvement of collections systems across the county, together with disposal solutions. Following initial modelling of the options which were available, there would be a public consultation phase of approximately three to four months towards the end of the year and the results of this would inform the project development. There was already a strong focus on reducing the volume of waste produced, together with driving up recycling rates, however, it was recognised that there would be a continued need for some waste disposal in the future.

It was intended that the EJMWS would be ready for adoption in approximately twelve to eighteen months time, and it would be up to individual local authorities whether or not they chose to adopt it, either in full or in part.

Councillor Chillingworth noted the importance of the waste and recycling service offered by the Council to all residents, and considered that the service which was currently offered was one of the best in the country. The most important driver for reviewing the Council's activities in this regard was the Environment Act 2021, which would have far reaching implications for all local authorities, and he offered his full support for the review of the Strategy and the manner in which this was proposed to be carried out.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor King, Jason Searles confirmed that the practical challenges which would be faced would potentially be difficult to overcome. In the past there had been different views across authorities in Essex, however, it was now hoped that there was now a shared vision in local authorities who were seeking to provide services with high levels of recycling, and the commitment which had been shown to this aim by Officers and Members was a big positive in overcoming any difficulty. From a strategic point of view, Rosa Tanfield reminded the Panel that the Environment Act 2021 was concerned with driving up consistency in waste collections, and afforded the Council an opportunity to align its strategies and policies. It was anticipated that central government would help to drive communication and engagement with the general public in relation to these issues, however, due to the work which had already been carried out, the Council was in a strong position to communicate with its residents directly. Although there was a gap between the current position and the Council's ambition, it was considered that the Council was in a good position to make the necessary changes in the future to deliver its Strategy.

The Panel heard that one of the largest obstacles facing local authorities was how to engage with residents who were not currently involved in recycling that was offered. A recent study by Essex County Council revealed that 25% of black bag waste was still made up of food recycling, despite the fact that food recycling services were offered across the County. Encouraging much broader participation in recycling schemes required complex issues to be tackled both locally and nationally.

Councillor Cory offered his support for the Have Your Say! speaker, and considered that the Council had a leadership role in putting pressure on the producers of packaging to reduce the waste they created, even if it could not directly control this. It was his opinion that the waste and recycling service offered by the Council was fantastic, and had operated extremely efficiently throughout the recent pandemic, balancing the cost of providing the service against the necessary performance. Councillor Cory was pleased to welcome a representative from Essex County Council to the meeting, and considered that close working between the two organisations in the future was the key to the success of the project. Jason Searles noted that despite difficulties with the Council receiving funding from Essex County Council in the past, over the past few years the Council had received funding to assist with food recycling services which was above that which was required by legislation.

Councillor Scordis considered that it should be made as easy as possible for residents to recycle their waste, and wondered whether Essex County Council had the capacity to deal with increased levels of recycling in the future. He considered it would be helpful to show the various transitions which waste went through as a means of educating the public, and in particular young people, and believed that the Council should have as firm an enforcement policy as was possible to allow it to target problem areas. Rosa confirmed that as part of the development of the Strategy, it was proposed to run workshop sessions which would allow details such as these to be incorporated into the Council's work in the future. The Panel heard that the processing of recycling waste was to come extent reliant on the market for recycled goods, and it was an aim of the Environment Act 2021 to improve the quality of recycled waste, as well as reducing this waste at its source.

Councillor Barber supported the comments that had been made in the meeting in

relation to reducing the amount of waste that was generated and to ensure that recycling was made as easy as possible for residents. He wondered how the desired increase in the consistency of recycling waste would be achieved, and Rosa advised that a number of elements of the Environment Act 2021 were specifically concerned with this, such as the Deposit Return Scheme, and the Extended Producer Responsibility elements of the legislation.

Councillor Young reminded the Panel that it was being asked to approve the proposed approach, objectives, principles and testing which had been set out in the report provided to it. She considered that the proposed objective of minimising the impact of waste on the environment should be assigned a higher priority than it currently appeared to have, based on the list of objectives provided. She considered the challenges which had been faced by the waste and recycling service in the past, and believed that staff welfare should also form part of the objectives of the proposed Strategy. Councillor Cory considered it necessary to pursue funding streams to enable an innovative approach to be taken to increasing levels of recycling, both in terms of funding from Essex County Council and from central government in partnership with Essex County Council.

Rosa confirmed to the Panel that workshops would be arranged in the future to discuss the future objectives of the Strategy in greater detail, and the Panel would consider regular updates on progress of the Strategy.

RESOLVED that: the proposed approach, objectives, principles and testing as set out in the report in relation to the development of Colchester Borough Council's Recycling and Waste Strategy be agreed.

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Community Engagement and Climate Emergency - Update

Jill Bruce, Lead Climate Ambassador for the Essex Federation of Women's Institutes, attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with Colchester Borough Council (the Council)'s Have Your Say! provisions. The Panel was urged to increase communication with the community on climate action to promote the impressive work which had been undertaken in this regard. The Panel were advised that Colchester Borough Council (the Council) was a trusted organisation which could use its influence to ensure that advantage was taken of as many government grants as possible by advising the local community of what was available to them. It was noted that when council tax invoices were sent to residents, they often included inserts with the invoice, and this would be an opportunity to raise awareness of available grant funding and provide additional relevant information. Although the Council was doing good work in this area, and making use of its social media accounts and other channels, Jill urged for more action to be taken, believing that there was still not enough public awareness.

Mandy Jones, Assistant Director - Place and Client Services, welcomed the points which had been made, and considered that there was scope for considering how the Council made use of its contacts with individuals and groups such as the Women's Institute, in the future. There was an opportunity to carry out some of this work with the Council's own social housing tenants, and it was key to the Council's communication strategy that a process of continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of various methods of communication was undertaken.

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The report gave an outline of the different methods by which the Council carried out community engagement, which sought to both inform residents about the work being undertaken by the Council, as well as a method for consultation to seek the views of interested parties and encourage collaborative working with communities.

Councillor Chillingworth addressed the Panel and explained that his personal view, which was in no way a criticism of Officers, was that the Council was missing the opportunity to effectively demonstrate to residents what action was being taken to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss. The Council had declared a Climate Emergency in July 2019, and resolved to publicise this to the people of Colchester to raise awareness and support the public to take effective action. The Council had undertaken great works in its quest for carbon neutrality by 2030, but was failing to publicise this effectively. To meet the national target for carbon neutrality was a huge task, and local authorities who were close to their communities had a key role to play in achieving this – enabling people to understand the problem and showing them what needed to be done. Although he considered that the Council was doing a good job with engaging with communities, more communication was needed, particularly targeted at people who were less aware of the issues that were faced.

Councillor Chillingworth had attempted to use the Council's website to find information, but his search for 'climate change' had only returned three relevant results, some of which were outdated. He considered that the Council should set up a dedicated website which covered environmental issues, and which would be accessed via a clear link from the Council's website homepage. The dedicated webpage might include information such as a clear scientific story explaining climate change, links to the latest news and to authoritative websites, and information about the latest government policies. It could also set out the work that the Council had undertaken, including working with the Carbon Trust and the fleet transition. Advice could also be given on action which residents could take themselves and what financial support was available to them to assist. It was also suggested that the website should offer the facility for posing questions, feedback and discussion, and it should be kept up to date with interesting articles and links to social media to maximise its accessibility. It was accepted that maintaining such a website would have cost implications, however, Councillor Chillingworth proposed that a recommendation be made to Cabinet that his suggestion be implemented, if the Panel supported this.

Councillor Barber supported the points that had been made, but further considered that local Councillors should also be challenged to share information themselves among their constituents, and he would welcome challenge from Officers as to whether he had done this effectively.

Councillor Cory considered that between 2018 and 2021 the Council had carried out some excellent work, but despite the obvious Officer commitment he remained frustrated by the lack of success in communicating this to the public. He offered his support for the suggestions which had been made by Councillor Chillingworth as a recommendation to Cabinet, and further considered that a communications officers dedicated to promoting the environmental work of the Council would be useful.

Ben Plummer advised the Panel that there was significant information on the Council's website in relation to environmental issues, although he could not comment on the function of the search facility. The current information was collected under the heading "sustainability and climate action", and included some information on the Council's work to date and action that local residents could take. The Panel were advised that a partner organisation, Eco-Colchester, maintained a comprehensive website with guides for residents and other information, and there was signposting on the Council's website to this site.

It had been noted that in the past Councillors had stated that they wished to do more to promote the Council's projects and wider assistance that was available to residents, and a monthly update had been circulated to all Councillors to facilitate this sharing of information about key projects and grant opportunities. Regular updates were also provided to Town and Parish Councils about opportunities which were available for them, and which could also be disseminated to their residents.

Mandy Jones advised the Panel that in her experience, most websites were used for completing transactions as opposed to seeking information, and information was more commonly sought via social media. More could be done to make additional content available via the Council's current website, but the Panel were advised that creating an additional platform would be difficult to achieve as it would require significant additional resources to keep this up to date. She considered that working with partners such as the Essex Climate Action Commission would be useful to maximise the reach of the Council's communications, before going ahead and creating a brand new platform. The Panel heard that use of the Council's website was low apart from transactional engagements, and people wishing to find information would use a search facility such as Google to find it, rather than visiting a specific website. It was suggested that the Council's communications were examined on a wider scale, with consideration being given to encouraging visits to the webpages which the Council currently had.

Councillor King supported the suggestions which had been made, and wondered whether external funding could be secured to support such a project. He noted that the Council had a large workforce, and wondered whether it would be possible to use this as a means of communicating the Council's message to a wider audience. Mandy Jones confirmed to the Panel that webinars had been carried out with staff in relation to the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan, with the aim of empowering them to become ambassadors for the Council in this regard, and Officers were also involved in awareness raising events across the borough.

Ben Plummer acknowledged the importance of digital communication, and advised the Panel that much of what had been discussed was already being carried out by the Council. He did, however, urge the Panel not to lose sight of the importance of in-person events for engaging the public and raising awareness of the Council's work among residents who may not be reached by digital means. Additional question and answer sessions were being considered to allow residents to pose questions to Officers, which had been successful elsewhere in Essex in engaging people.

It was suggested that green communication channels could be an item included in the

work programme of future Panels.

RESOLVED that: A recommendation be made to Cabinet that Colchester Borough Council establishes a website dedicated to environmental issues, accessed via an easy, simple link from Colchester Borough Council's home page, to cover subjects such as:

1. A clear scientific story of what the climate problem is and why it has happened. This would include pollution and biodiversity loss, latest news and links where possible to authoritative websites.
2. Government targets and policies.
3. What the Council is doing, its work with The Carbon Trust, its Climate Emergency Action Plan, its fleet transition, etc.
4. What people can do themselves; householder advice, tips, financial aid schemes.
5. What partner organisations and commercial companies are doing in Colchester.
6. What Town and Parish Councils are doing.
7. Volunteer news and programmes.
8. What can be done around Listed property, Conservation areas and the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
9. Feedback, questions, and interactive discussion.

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Climate Emergency Action Plan - Summary of Progress 2021/2022

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel heard that the report that had been presented to it contained some highlights of the work which had been carried out throughout the preceding year, which had already been considered by the Panel in previous meetings.

The Panel had no questions in relation to the report which had been presented, and offered its fulsome thanks to Ben and other Officers for their work over the preceding year, and the numerous achievements which had been recorded.

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RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

Work Programme 2021-2022

Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the work programme be noted.