

**Extract from the draft minutes of the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel meeting of 20 January 2020**

**46. Next steps regarding options for Colchester High Street: agreeing objectives, gathering data and consulting stakeholders and the public**

**Councillor Jowers (by reason of being a member of Essex County Council) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7 (5).**

The Chairman clarified that this item was to discuss the future of Colchester High Street in general terms and consider the potential for reducing the amount of traffic using it.

Sir Bob Russell addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1). Sir Bob gave his view that pedestrianisation of the High Street would disturb the equilibrium of the Town centre and should not be introduced. Banning traffic from the High Street would cause problems for the surrounding areas and would disrupt bus networks. Sir Bob estimated that around 80% of the Town centre was already pedestrianised.

Sir Bob Russell raised issues which he believed should be addressed instead. These included a review of bus stop placements in the Town Centre, and improvement in paving especially where damaged, such as at the southern end of West Stockwell Street.

A member of the Panel described historic investigations carried out on traffic movements using the High Street, around the year 2000. These had shown that many vehicles used the High Street as a through route. It was put forward that these were the journeys which should be re-directed to alternative routes, by finding ways to lower congestion in other parts of Colchester.

Mr Nick Chilvers addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) and raised his concern over weaknesses in the Town's road network, especially in the South East. Of particular concern was the difficulty in reaching the A12 or facilities in the North of Town, as experienced by those living to the South East, from Middlewick to Rowhedge. Mr Chilvers asked if the Borough Council had influence on the County Council's transport strategy.

Mr Chilvers further questioned what demolition work would be required to allow the proposed Rapid Transit System (RTS) to be routed into Colchester and requested that High Street pedestrianisation be avoided and other traffic issues be prioritised.

Karen Syrett, Housing and Planning Manager, introduced the report, which was an update on progress since the report the Panel received on Colchester High Street in January 2019. The report covered impacts on the High Street, Town Centre, and beyond. It referenced the Rapid Transit System (RTS) and the County Council's emerging Transport Strategy, both of which have evolved over the past twelve months, with the draft Transport Strategy due for consultation in the near future, whilst the RTS scheme had gained millions in Government funding. The recently-announced Towns Fund was described, with work progressing on the Town Deal which will be needed for Colchester to successfully bid for up to £25m in central government funding. The objectives for this were for long-term economic and productivity growth, encompassing land use and regeneration, improvements to skills and enterprise, and connectivity (both digital and transport links). These issues were seen as being interconnected, and so officers were considering them in this context.

The relationship between the new Strategic Priorities and Colchester High Street were highlighted, in particular the priorities for the Town Centre, and on promoting the use of walking and cycling links. There were a range of possible options, from doing nothing through to full pedestrianisation. Research and consultation would be necessary to inform the Town Deal and the related investment plan.

Matthew Brown, Economic Development Manager, provided further information on work towards the Town Deal Plan, which was expected to be ready by June/July of this year. The content was specific, such as a focus on infrastructure, enabling measures and the mitigation of identified blocking factors. A small team had been and was being appointed to oversee the necessary work, including an engagement officer. The Town Deal area included much of the residential area of Colchester and much of the key infrastructure.

A member of the Panel noted that the possibility of High Street pedestrianisation had been raised several times over past decades, that the RTS and link roads are related to the North Essex Garden Communities Project and that it was not expected that this would necessitate any demolitions. Addressing the points made by Mr Chilvers, a number of Panel members agreed that there was potential and need for a Southern bypass and/or relief road, especially were further development be carried out to the South of Colchester. This would be of use to villages to the South of the Town, and help improve East-West links from Tendring, easing pressure on existing links. It was further opined that Essex County Council (ECC) did listen to its partners, including borough and district councils, and that Colchester Borough Council (CBC) had additional links to ECC, with a member of CBC also being the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure at ECC.

The Panel noted that the Colchester bus network primarily ran through the Town Centre, and especially the High Street, potentially due to roads around the centre being as heavily congested as the High Street. The Panel queried whether, as part

of a consultation exercise, the feasibility of changing bus routes could be assessed, potentially to see if these could avoid using the High Street. Past suggestions had included a circular bus route around the Town, possibly using electric buses and including a transport hub near Colchester's main railway station.

A Panel member opined that bus routes offered and fares charged were evidence that buses were a low priority. Routes were not convenient for those with restricted mobility and some areas, particularly rural areas, had been reduced to an hourly or once-every-two-hours service. Residents often saw this as a disincentive to use buses rather than their cars and the Panel member suggested that efforts should be made to investigate whether some services could be provided by community interest groups, where gaps existed. The Housing and Planning Manager cautioned that the Council would need to adhere to rules relating to state aid, should it look at options for community bus provision. Rachel Forkin further advised that community demand would need to be evidenced before a community bus service could be introduced. The Panel noted that there was often a difference between what respondents to consultations said they wanted, and what they would actually use, and that this should be borne in mind.

Concern was raised that the County Council's Transport Strategy was emerging before the work to set out a vision for Colchester could produce results, potentially leading to a transport strategy being put in place prior to the vision that it should be designed to support. It was queried whether this could potentially limit the options for the centre of Colchester.

The Housing and Planning Manager confirmed that the four potential routes for the proposed link road all aimed to avoid the need for demolition of existing properties. She further agreed that significant forward planning was needed to examine ways to progress towards the building of a southern relief road. It was also confirmed that ECC had worked with bus operators on the drafting of their emerging Transport Strategy, but that it was not known if this had included discussion of route changes. It was known that bus operators were concerned at parking prices in Colchester being relatively low, thus incentivising car use over buses. It was considered possible to develop the vision for Colchester alongside the new transport strategy. The emerging Transport Strategy would not be finalised for some time to come following an engagement exercise.

The Panel requested more detail on funding secured for the RTS and the A120/133 Link Road. The Housing and Planning Manager confirmed that £99.9 million of government funding had been secured toward the cost of the RTS and the Link Road, with more secured via Section 106 agreements. Concern was raised by Panel members that, should the West Tey North Essex Garden Community go ahead, there would be additional strain on the road links through to Ipswich and Tendring. Should development also occur in the Middlewick area, it was argued by a Panel member that measures would need to be taken to assist through traffic in diverting around that area.

A Panel member focused on the report being a report on the High Street and that efforts should be made to press for improvements in the existing paving and reduction in traffic density. It was affirmed that this was in context of needing to examine the future for the wider Town and that all stakeholders would need to work together, including ECC, CBC and bus companies to provide traffic reduction, better bus routes, relief roads and other measures to support the Town centre vision, once created. The Housing and Planning Manager confirmed that this was the approach being pursued by Council officers. She further confirmed that she would investigate an ongoing and specific traffic issue raised by Councillor Scott Boutell and concerning Warren Lane.

The future development of Park and Ride in Colchester was discussed and the Housing and Planning Manager explained that no specific location for an eastern terminus had been identified, but that an additional Park and Ride from the East of Town was being considered and was recognised as being desirable, given the growth expected to the East of Colchester.

The Panel reiterated the importance of considering any knock-on effects that changes to the High Street might have and drew on past experience of where changes had caused problems in the surrounding road network. The Panel did, however, welcome the proposed examination of different options and ideas to reduce traffic density through the High Street, potentially including improvements to alternative cross-town routes. This would provide the best change of producing a more-successful urban network.

*RESOLVED* that the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel had noted and discussed the report.

*RECOMMENDED* to CABINET that alongside consultation and engagement exercises linked to each of the above work programmes, Officers commission a study looking at the options for reducing traffic in the High Street.