

Environment and Sustainability Panel

Thursday, 24 February 2022

Attendees: Councillor Peter Chillingworth, Councillor Mark Cory, Councillor John Jowers, Councillor David King, Councillor Julie Young

Also Attending:

Apologies: Councillor Lewis Barber, Councillor Lee Scordis

Substitutes: Councillor Michael Lilley (for Councillor Lee Scordis)

55 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Councillor Chillingworth requested that the minutes of the previous meeting be amended to show that the central heating system he had installed had replaced an old oil powered system, and not a gas powered system.

RESOLVED that: the amended minutes of the meeting held on 13 January 2022 be confirmed as a correct record.

56 Have Your Say! (Hybrid meetings)

The Panel had received a written representation from Kemal Cufoglu, which was read out by Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer. Mr Cufoglu's representation was on behalf of the Green Action Team and Pesticide Free Essex, and he made a number of enquiries in relation to the use of glyphosate as part of the grounds maintenance programme at Colchester Borough Homes (CBH). He requested confirmation that there was a clear commitment to phasing out the use of glyphosate weed killer on CBH grounds, to be replaced with other methods of weed control, and that there would be no increase to the maintenance fees of residents as a result of this. He noted that CBH was owned by Colchester Borough Council (the Council), and suggested that the Council should support CBH to achieving these aims. Pesticide Free Essex and Green Action Team would be happy to offer any assistance they could to the Council to find glyphosate alternatives and environmentally friendly maintenance practices.

Mandy Jones, Assistant Director – Place and Client Services was able to provide a comprehensive update on the work which had been undertaken in relation to the provision of a glyphosate free weed control programme which had been the result of an agreement reached between CBH, the Council, and the Council's landscape contractors, I D Verde. Weeds growing in shrub borders and other cultivated areas would be removed by hand or with hand tools as part of the normal border maintenance, undertaken by existing maintenance teams. A regular strimming programme for weeds growing round obstacles and on hard surfaces would be maintained in line with the grass cutting schedule, however, weeds and grass growing around the base of trees would be left uncut. An alternative herbicide was to be trialled in a specific car park, with results compared to other maintenance methods, and bark mulch would be spread in certain areas to act as a weed suppressant on a trial basis. The effectiveness of the new approach would be carefully monitored to identify whether any improvements were needed.

Although the new approach would increase the cost of weed control, this would be

borne by existing budgets, and balanced through a change to the amount of general maintenance works and improvement works. It was likely that weeds would be more visible across the Council's estates as a result of the new approach, and the level of these would be monitored, with 'frequently asked questions' documents being produced to assist CBH in answering queries. Communications would be provided to the public explaining what the new approach was, and why it had been adopted.

Sustainable Travel: Our Approach and work to date

The Panel was addressed by Alderman Theresa Higgins, as part of the Have Your Say! provision at the meeting, who was representing the Colchester Cycle Campaign. She wished to encourage Colchester Borough Council (the Council) to do more to encourage cycling in Colchester, and considered that improvements were needed to the town's infrastructure to facilitate this, including the main routes across the town. It was also important to provide secure cycle parking in the town centre, and at Council buildings such as the Town Hall and Rowan House. The cycle parking facilities at Leisure World were particularly unsuitable, and there should be much greater provision for cycle parking on the site. The cycle paths which were in existence required more maintenance than they were receiving, and the lack of secure cycle parking facilities for residents was also a barrier to encouraging cycling in the borough. The Panel were also advised that the lighting on cycle routes needed to be improved, with no lighting being provided along many cycle pathways. From the point of view of promoting sustainable travel in more general terms It was considered that busses needed to be encouraged to use a wider variety of bus stops in the town centre, enabling passengers to be dropped off much nearer to their intended destination without the need to walk for long distances.

Jane Thompson, Transport and Sustainability Joint Lead, acknowledged the issues that had been raised in respect of the cycle routes through the town centre, and the issue of maintaining existing routes had been raised with Essex County Council, together with a request for the provision of additional lighting on cycle routes through the town. With regard to cycle parking, it was hoped that a new secure cycle park would be opening in the spring. Work was ongoing with Essex County Council in relation to their new Bus Strategy, which would address issues such as bus stop availability. Councillor Young noted that the change in the use of bus stops in the town had caused controversy a number of years ago, and hoped that the current review would be able to address the issues that the changes had caused.

Jane Thompson, Transport and Sustainability Joint Lead, attended the meeting to present the report, and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel had requested that the Council's work on sustainable travel be presented to it. The Council's approach to sustainable transport was embedded within the Strategic Plan and the Climate Emergency Action Plan, and aligned with Essex County Council work streams such as the Active Travel Fund and Colchester Future Transport Strategy, as well as aligning with national government policy. The Council's approach combined awareness of national and regional policy to support funding bids, coupled with community engagement and the constant monitoring of action taken to deliver the goals which had been developed.

Emily Harrup, Transport and Sustainability Joint Lead, advised the Panel that the Council adopted a very collaborative approach to sustainable travel, working with both external and internal partners closely wherever possible. It was especially vital to work closely with Essex County Council as the Highway Authority, and work was also undertaken with the University of Essex and the Clinical Commissioning Group.

Examples of projects which had been delivered in partnership with others included the CAREless pollution campaign which was the result of three months of community engagement, the assistance of local businesses in promoting the Council's e-cargo bike scheme, and Colchester's Eco Festival which had yielded valuable feedback. Key barriers to sustainable transport had been highlighted as poor infrastructure, poor air quality and the perception of the lack of safety associated with sustainable transport options. A recent Air Quality Survey had shown that 43% of Colchester residents would consider giving up a first or second car if they had access to a shared transport scheme, and a survey carried out by Essex County Council showed that those who drove short and medium distances would be encouraged to cycle more if segregated routes were provided.

Jane Thompson advised the Panel that two main goals had been identified. The first of these was to increase the proportion of short trips made by sustainable transport, and the second was to reduce air pollutants, which would be achieved by residents and businesses making greater use of shared pay-as-you-go transport schemes such as car clubs, more people choosing to switch off their engines, and enabling local residents to feel more confident about buying electric vehicles. Of critical importance to the Council's goals was the provision of improved infrastructure, and investment to enable the provision of this infrastructure was lobbied for, supported by local walking and cycling infrastructure plans and the development of Active Travel Fund routes. Section 106 contributions had been secured from developers to implement infrastructure projects, and an external partner had been located who would provide secure cycle parking in the town centre, which was due to open in the spring and was the first of its kind in Essex.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) funding had enabled the provision of two shared transport hubs in the town centre, including access to ebikes and e-cargo bikes on a pay-as-you-go basis. Two electric cars would also be based in the town centre, and it was hoped that the development of electric car clubs would come forth from this. The Council was working to ensure that wayfinding and signage was improved around the Colchester Orbital route, together with improvements to the accessibility of the route to disabled users. Work was ongoing with Essex County Council to provide adult cycle training to improve confidence in using bicycles, and consideration was being given to improvements which could be made to the Bikeability Plus scheme to help translate training into an increase in cycling.

The first phase of the Clean Air Colchester campaign had been completed, and phase two would now focus on building a legacy in partnership with the voluntary group Clean Air Colchester to enable the campaign to continue once funding had come to an end.

Councillor King acknowledged that safety while cycling was of paramount importance, and considered that until this could be improved, there would be a continued reluctance for parents to encourage their children to cycle. He praised the breadth of the work that the Council was undertaking, and sought assurances on whether there was sufficient resource internally to support it. He also asked for a view on what was most realisable, in terms of connecting up the areas of existing good infrastructure. Jane confirmed to the Panel that the good work which had been undertaken in identifying key areas for development had placed the Council in a strong position to bid for funding, and work was ongoing with Essex County Council to ensure that Colchester was seen as an ideal place for future investment. The Panel were advised that Essex County Council had adapted its approach to sustainable transport over the

past few years, and now had staff in post specifically to promote sustainable schemes, which was considered to be very encouraging.

Councillor Cory also considered safety was a key priority for encouraging cycling, and wondered whether any consideration had been given to painting cycle routes to create a clear demarcation. He considered it was important to encourage people to use the proposed secured cycle parking, and enquired what the cost would be for using this. He considered that the Council should take a firm line with developers and give clear direction on what was expected to be included in planning applications to support sustainable travel. He praised the e-cargo bike scheme, and the training which had enabled his use of an e-cargo bike, but expressed some reservations around the parking of the e-scooters around town which was often obstructive on the pavements. Mandy Jones confirmed that following the adoption of the Local Plan, two new Supplementary Planning Documents would be introduced, the first of which was Sustainability and Climate Change, and the second of which was Biodiversity Net Gain.

Jane Thompson explained to the Panel that there was balance to be struck when considering painting cycle lanes, many of which ran through conservation areas, and this was something taken into account by Essex County Council. The secure cycle parking was being provided by a commercial operator and would attract a fee for its use. The Council had provided supporting funding to the operator and because of this the costs would be kept low, in the region of £1 per day or £10 per month to park a bicycle. The charging would be kept under constant review, with the key aim being to make the scheme successful, and ultimately duplicate it elsewhere in the town. The Panel heard that central government had asked for an extension of the current e-scooter trial until November, and the company that ran the scheme, Spin, had undertaken work to limit the use of the e-scooter via geofencing certain roads and areas where their use was not suitable. The Panel were assured that work was already undertaken with developers to encourage the provision of sustainable transport options in the town centre, and more electric car club cars were anticipated in the future. The cost of the secure cycling parking would be tailored to ensure that it was affordable to families travelling together to town.

Councillor Jowers considered that the work and aims of the Council were laudable, however, the plans were totally town focussed, and areas such as Mersea, Tiptree and the smaller villages should also be included in the Council's plans. Although he understood that there was a need to focus on the initially achievable aims, he considered that there would be a demand for a 'park and cycle' site on Mersea which would merit consideration, and that the populations of the outlying areas currently had no choice but to use their cars to access shops and services, even if they would prefer to cycle. Mandy Jones acknowledged the difficulty inherent in linking villages with cycle paths on country lanes, but considered that Tiptree may be able to be considered for sustainable transport projects in the future, and would consider whether it would be appropriate to consider this as part of the Neighbourhood Plans for larger, more urban areas.

Councillor Chillingworth supported the comments made by Councillor Jowers, and considered that the dangers of cycling on the roadways from villages into town would discourage cycling as a method of transport. He wondered whether existing footpaths could be converted into cycleways, and asked Officers to continue their work with Essex County Council to find a solution to the problem.

Councillor Lilley considered that a new park and ride site in the south of the borough would be most useful, and expressed his opinion that bus fares were very high, and

could contribute to a reluctance to abandon car use. He believed that radical steps needed to be taken to improve the air quality in Colchester town centre, possibly introducing an additional charge for petrol vehicles entering the town, together with the introduction of electric busses.

The Panel were advised that consideration was being given to a variety of different ways in which people could use their cars to access Colchester town centre, including both 'park and ride' and 'park and stride' schemes, and the addition of electric charging points in car parks. The provision of bus services was also being considered, to ensure that as wide a variety of bus services as possible was provided, to encourage their use.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

58

Overview of the Environment Act 2021

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel were advised that the Environment Act 2021 (the Act) made a number of provisions in relation to targets, plans and policies for improving the natural environment, and one of the key impacts that this would have was the creation of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) which would act as a watchdog organisation to monitor the progress that had been made against defined targets. The Act required the secretary of state for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to set long-term legally binding targets on air quality, biodiversity, water, resource efficiency, and waste reduction. These targets would be of at least 15 years in duration and be proposed by late 2022.

The Panel heard that there were three main areas in which the Act affected Colchester Borough Council (the Council). The Government was required to introduce two new air quality targets by 31 October 2022, but these had yet to be set. It was, however, felt that the work that the Council had already undertaken to improve air quality in the town centre, together with the introduction of new air quality monitors, would assist in meeting the targets once these had been set.

The second area in which the Act was expected to impact on the Council was waste and recycling. The Panel had previously been briefed on two key areas of the legislation, Extended Producer Responsibility for Packaging (EPR), and the Deposit Return Scheme (DRS). The intention behind the schemes was to ensure that the producers of packaging took far greater responsibility for the costs of collection and disposal of packaging, together with seeking to incentivise recycling of packaging and increasing recycling quality. The Act also sought to improve consistency in household and business recycling, however, it was felt that the Council was performing well in this regard, and some of the actions required by the Act would not impact on the Council's operations. It was intended that the recycling of soft plastic packaging, which is traditionally very difficult to recycle, would become widespread as the recycling infrastructure improved across the country, with the requirement to recycle these plastics likely to be introduced further in the future.

The third main area in which the Act was expected to impact on the Council was in respect of planning. The Act stipulated that developments would have to demonstrate a 10% biodiversity net gain where local habitats were affected. Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) would be required, and although the Council would have input into a county-wide LNRS, it would not be the body responsible for enforcing this.

Councillor Jowers, commented that significant volumes of waste were currently being

put into ballast, and although new technology was emerging which would allow waste to be disposed of in an ecologically friendly manner, considered that more action was needed. Officers considered that the intention behind the legislation to improve the recycling infrastructure in the United Kingdom was to be welcomed, and noted that the DRS had been successful in other countries around the world.

Councillor Cory considered that even if individuals did what they could to reduce waste, large corporations were still generating huge volumes of carbon emissions, and action needed to be taken to address this. He believed that although improved recycling was necessary, the production of plastic packaging should be stopped altogether. Concern was also raised with regard to biodiversity net gain, as Councillor Cory believed that it was not possible to simply replace areas of habitat disrupted by development. He considered that the issue was much more complicated than it first appeared and further information was necessary. Mandy Jones confirmed that full guidance was awaited, and once this had been received the practical meaning of 10% biodiversity net gain could be explored further, providing a pathway to developing a Supplementary Planning Document.

Councillor Chillingworth welcomed the Act, and considered that it would have far reaching effects. He was hopeful that the OEP would have the necessary powers to ensure that regulations were complied with. The Panel looked forward to receiving more details in relation to the Act as these became available.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

59 Climate Emergency Action Plan Update

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. At its previous meeting, the Panel had requested details on how many referrals had been received under the Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery scheme, and it was advised that the most up to date figures showed ninety four referrals in Colchester, the third highest figure in Essex. It was considered that the promotion of the scheme had been very effective through social media and community groups, and it was hoped that this would be expanded upon in the future.

Colchester Borough Council (the Council)'s Climate Emergency Action Plan had been reviewed by an external organisation, Climate Emergency UK. The review only looked at the plans and strategies that were contained within the Policy, and did not consider any actions which had been put into practice. The Council's score was 53%, which was above the national average for district councils of 43%, however, the review had highlighted several gaps in the Action Plan which would be addressed. A further analysis of the review would be undertaken at the next meeting of the Panel.

Councillor Chillingworth commented that he had thought the Council was performing better than the review showed, and considered that the review should take into account the action that had been carried out in support of the Plan. Mandy Jones, Assistant Director – Place and Client Services advised the Panel that even though a lot of very good work was being carried out by local authorities across the country, Colchester had still scored 10% higher than the average, which represented a good achievement. Care needed to be taken when considering potential gaps in the Policy to ensure that any changes or amendments were meaningful and not simply implemented for the sake of receiving a few extra marks in the review.

In response to a question from Councillor Jowers, the Panel were advised that the Climate Focus Area had taken a nature based approach, and the intention was that

the Area covered both green and blue spaces, together with an urban area. The purpose of the Area was to support and accelerate net zero and other environmental initiatives.

Councillor Young was pleased that ninety four residents had registered to potentially get assistance with insulating their homes, and she wondered whether there was an opportunity to share the experience of a family that had benefitted, with the aim of encouraging others to come forward. Ben Plummer confirmed that Essex County Council was leading on the project, and was keen to make use of case studies in future promotions. The addresses of those who had registered under the scheme would be acquired so to enable the Council to undertake more targeted promotion to be undertaken under phase 3 of the scheme.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

60 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.