

# Policy Panel

Wednesday, 28 June 2023

**Attendees:** Councillor Kevin Bentley, Councillor Jocelyn Law, Councillor Sue Lissimore, Councillor Sam McCarthy, Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell, Councillor Rhys Smithson, Councillor Julie Young

**Apologies:**

**Substitutes:**

## 75 Minutes of Previous Meeting

*RESOLVED* that the minutes of the meetings held on 1 March 2023 and 24 May 2023 be approved as correct records.

## 76 Work Programme 2023-24

Councillor Bentley (by reason of being Leader 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 Panel discussed ideas for its Work Programme for the current municipal year, including the potential for updates on items it considered in 2022-23, such as on the Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy development proposal [formerly the Green/Blue Infrastructure Strategy], cost of living, Year of Celebration, and on Member Champions. The Chairman stated that it would be good to get a range of issues, with some in reserve in case time became available to consider them. Councillor Cory, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Resources, explained that the approach to the Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy development proposal had changed, and that this was now part of a process to develop a wider strategy on this, led by the Local Plan Committee. Rosa Tanfield, Head of Neighbourhood Services, gave more detail on how the Planning Team was leading on a broader strategy, including development matters, and would be taking this to Local Plan Committee. Options were being looked at as to how the Policy Panel could assist in scoping or drafting.

A Panel member requested seeking permission to review the Council's Equality and Diversity Policy. The Deputy Leader agreed that this would be a good idea, and that it would be useful for the Panel to look at policies which could benefit from being updated. Equality and Diversity policies dealt with officers, councillors and members of the public.

A Panel member recommended looking at how to help attract new retail outlets to improve the retail offering, arguing that there was much that was positive in the City Centre Masterplan, but that the retail offer was not improving. The Deputy Leader noted that Colchester's rate of occupied retail units was good compared to many places, and suggested that the Business Improvement District [BID] could be asked to present and join discussion of how to attract more.

A request was made for the Panel to seek permission to examine the Leisure and Sport facilities in Colchester, including an audit of what existed, which venues made money, which didn't, and the carbon emissions of each.

A further suggestion was made that the Panel could examine community facilities, what facilities existed and where there were gaps in provision. An example was given of the St Mark's Community Centre in High Woods. Another Panel member suggested that the Panel could request permission for a separate, wider review of local facilities of community value, incorporating public, private and charitable sector facilities, looking at what was available in each area of Colchester's wider area. The Deputy Leader agreed that it would be good to get an examination of the Community Asset-based Infrastructure Strategy. An asset register held details of all Council assets, and the Local Plan Committee had access to a list of buildings of general community value, and could examine and update this. The Deputy Leader noted that it was possible that there may be some assets which fell between the lists and were not included on either. A Panel member requested that the Panel review the Council's Policy on communities' right to bid on assets which were to be sold, as this had not recently been reviewed.

A Panel member asked if it would be possible to scrutinise the Council's Parking Policy and income from car parks, looking at how best to manage income whilst encouraging more people to move to active travel options. The Deputy Leader cautioned that this might lie with another committee already, but stated that the Council's Parking Strategy could be appropriate for Panel review, with Richard Walker, Head of Parking, providing an update and assisting in discussions as to the balance between income protection and the encouraging of active travel options. The Head of Neighbourhood Services agreed to look into whether this was something which could come to the Panel.

The Council's policy on mowing was raised, and the potential for the Panel to seek ways to help avoid complaints. The Deputy Leader noted that this fell under the Grounds Maintenance Contract, which was already coming back to the Panel. The Head of Neighbourhood Services explained that the next annual update on the Contract, and work to move it in house, would come to the Panel in March 2024, with a focus on the transition to new arrangements. Concerns raised about the current contract were being taken onboard and the Head of Neighbourhood Services committed to raise these with colleagues following the meeting.

A Panel member suggested that it would be worth checking and updating all Council Policies over time, and seek assurances as to compliance with them. This led to a further query, as to whether the Policy Panel's Terms of Reference could be altered, to remove the ambiguity shown in the first term of reference. Councillor Cory, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Resources, gave assurance that, whilst Cabinet can ask the Panel to examine and develop policies, the Panel could also request permission to examine and develop policy on its own initiative. Concern was still raised that the words 'identified by Cabinet' should be amended and the wording tidied up.

A request was made from a Panel member for an examination to be carried out on how to get best value for money from the Council's waste policy, with a specific focus

on the potential for using shared-service options to save money. The Deputy Leader explained that parts of the Council's approach to waste management were already going to Scrutiny Panel for consideration and was in the remit of the Environment and Sustainability Panel. The Deputy Leader stated that Cabinet would look at who would be best to examine this. The Head of Neighbourhood Services noted that the Recycling and Waste Strategy for Colchester was expected to go through the Scrutiny Panel before being considered by Cabinet. All options would be looked at, including use of shared services.

The Panel considered the potential for options to consider whether the Panel could help draft a policy on commemorative installations and/or events. The Deputy Leader agreed that this would be good for the Panel to consider, and that the Council already had a policy on flags. A Panel member pointed out that there was no policy on Covid memorials or other memorialisation.

A Panel member asked if the Licensing, Food and Safety Policy needed reviewing, as it was due to expire in 2024. Matt Evans, Democratic Services Officer confirmed that this was not a Policy which was reviewed by the Council's Licensing Committee. The Head of Neighbourhood Services confirmed that she would seek officer advice on how to bring this to the Panel, subject to Cabinet approval.

The Panel considered a request for it to seek permission to look at a wider-scale project, potentially to draft a policy to ensure that rural wards do not lose out on funding, compared to urban wards. A Panel member posited that additional funding for urban wards often came from Section 106 funding [contributions from developers as Planning Obligations].

The Panel discussed the ideas raised and a member recommended letting officers consider how to bring the necessary reports and information to the Panel on the items to which Cabinet gave approval. The Head of Neighbourhood Services suggested that updates on performance under the current extended Grounds Maintenance contract and work on the Colchester Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy be brought to the Panel meeting scheduled on 2 August 2023, and that the 27 September 2023 meeting receive an update on the cost of living crisis, financial inequality and benefit matters, as shown in the draft Work Programme.

The Panel discussed whether policies or issues should be considered which fell under the heritage theme of the Strategic Plan, potentially looking at assets of community value across all wards, what should be considered to be on the list of assets and how they could be protected, such as the protection of parts of Middlewick Ranges.

*RESOLVED* that the Panel receive the following updates:

- a) Colchester Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy, and an update on performance under the current Grounds Maintenance contract on 2 August 2023;
- b) Financial inequality and cost of living, on 27 September 2023

*RECOMMENDED* to CABINET that the Policy Panel be given approval to examine the following subjects:

- a) Equality and Diversity Policy;
- b) The Council's Policy on Procurement;
- c) Commemorations locally, including benches, flags and statues;
- d) Ways to support an increase in the retail offer of Colchester and economic draw of its shops;
- e) Sport and leisure facilities and provision;
- f) Mapping and examination of community assets and asset-based community development approach;
- g) The Licensing, Food and Health and Safety Policy;
- h) Policy on rights to bid on assets of community value, when up for sale;
- i) A review of the Parking Strategy.