

Environment and Sustainability Panel

22 June 2023

Present: Councillor Steph Nissen (Chair)
Councillor Tracey Arnold (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Molly Bloomfield
Councillor Pam Cox
Councillor Paul Dundas
Councillor Sue Lissimore
Councillor Venessa Moffat
Councillor Natalie Sommers

Substitutes: Councillor Darius Laws for Councillor Andrew Ellis
Councillor Richard Kirkby-Taylor for Councillor Goacher

Also present:

94. Welcome and announcements

In light of the fact that the Panel was comprised of some new members, Councillor Nissen, in her role as Chair of the Panel, reminded all present of the Terms of Reference of the Panel.

95. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED that: the minutes of the meetings of 21 March 2023 and 24 May 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

96. Have Your Say!

Alderman Peter Chillingworth attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with the Council's Have Your Say! provisions. He reminded the Panel of the Colne Valley Countryside Project (CVCP) which had been jointly run by Colchester Borough Council and Braintree District Council. This project had ceased in 2010 due to a lack of funding. The CVCP used to work with the public on projects promoting access to the countryside, supporting wildlife and other environmental projects. The Council was working on projects which would impact the lower reaches of the Colne, but would not affect the upper reaches, which included a large number of parishes across a very large area. Alderman Chillingworth felt that the time was right to restart the CVCP as a group led by volunteers for 2 reasons:

1. The governments' payment to farmers was now based on environmental works and not production. A great deal of advice and coordination would be needed to ensure that this funding was not wasted, and the actions of individual farmers would benefit the environment as a whole.
2. The public were aware of the environment and were eager to become involved in schemes of this nature.

In the absence of proposals from the Council, Alderman Chillingworth was proposing to establish a community-lead group staffed by volunteers, called the Colne Valley Countryside Group. He sought support from the Panel, and the Council. If enough support was received, he would put the proposal to Parish Councils and set up a public meeting to gauge interest. He envisaged a local co-ordinator who would organise the expertise of local people and environmental organisations. Such a group would need little finance of its own but would be able to take advantage of grant funding and local projects. Would the Panel support this idea and put it forward for consideration by Cabinet and Senior Officer?

Andrew Tyrrell, Head of Public Protection, advised the Panel that the Council had been considering its Blue and Green Infrastructure Strategy. The development of this Strategy had been informed by wider areas, and had included the creation of farm clusters to work with local farmers in supporting the whole ecosystem of the river network. The Council was keen to work in partnership with other bodies across administrative boundaries. Officers would consider Alderman Chillingworth's proposal and refer the matter back to the Panel at an appropriate time to consider whether to make a recommendation to Cabinet.

Rachel Mathews attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with the Council's Have Your Say! provisions. She had been a keen environmentalist and supporter of green energy for some years, and her office was powered by solar energy. She had been mortified to find that the production of lithium generated a huge amount of waste each year including sulfuric acid and uranium, and the mining of cobalt was carried out at a great human cost. An Ethical Consumer Organisation report had stated that it was hard to avoid forced labour in the solar panel supply chain. The Panel heard that wind turbines lasted about 20 years, and required a huge amount of resources and energy to both manufacture and maintain, including the requirement for diesel starter engines and gallons of lubricating oil. Both wind turbine and solar panels were extremely difficult to recycle, costing more than the production of the items themselves. She considered that these so-called green or ethical solutions were not solutions at all, but simply represented good marketing by the \$1.5 trillion a year climate change industry. Future environmental damage should be limited by avoiding the use of unnecessary electric vehicles (EVs) and acres of solar farms occupying farmland.

The Panel heard that there was currently no definition of what constituted a 'green' offering, and current proposed solutions were not better than current energy solutions, and in many regards were much worse. Knowing the true cost of so-called green technologies, she could not support the Council as it embarked on faux-green endeavours. She had made the Council aware of the human cost of cobalt mining at the last Panel meeting, and considered that to continue to support any form of slavery through spending public money was negligent. Many of the well-intentioned

projects which the council was pursuing were harmful, and she considered that it was necessary for all such projects to be immediately halted while a detailed investigation was carried out, in accordance with the Council's own Code of Conduct which specifically required that Council resources were not mis-used.

The Council was obligated to always seek the best available knowledge, and that should it transpire that any Council policy, no matter how well intentioned, should prove to be harmful, then the Council was obligated to stop following this policy.

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, advised the Panel that when considering projects, Officers did carry out research and try to consider what was in the best interest of people and the environment. It had to be acknowledged that everything had some kind of environmental impact, and the Council was considering the most appropriate use of available technologies.

The Head of Public Protection confirmed that the Council was always open to considering new evidence and adapting its strategies and policies accordingly if appropriate.

In response to Officers, Rachel Mathews considered that investing in the current sub-standard technology would ultimately be a waste of money, and any investment should be held off until genuine solutions were identified. She further considered that the Council was investing in slavery which was unacceptable. She noted that the Council had not provided a definition of what a climate emergency was, and was not therefore in a position to know what it had ended. The climate emergency needed to be properly defined, and any policy decisions which were taken in reliance on the declaration of a climate emergency needed to be properly evidenced.

The Chair of the Panel confirmed that a full written response to the questions which Ms Mathews had raised would be provided by Officers within a week.

Karina Cooper attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with the Council's Have Your Say! provisions. On 6 June, she had asked the Council's Scrutiny Panel to scrutinise why the Environment and Sustainability Panel were continuing with environmentally harmful plans. Why was the Council ignoring documented safety concerns with regard to EVs, and would the Council confirm that associated serious fire safety concerns were not valid? Had Essex Fire Service been consulted by the Council in relation to the toxic runoff from EV fires? The name of a specific Council Officer who would be responsible for compromising public safety was requested. The dangers of EVs had been highlighted and it was considered that if the Council continued to act negligently then liability would rest with the Council as well as individuals. A public forum had been requested, and the Council was called upon to support the climate data it was relying on, together with a claim of a man-made climate emergency.

Few people were aware of the full extent of the net zero plans and had not read the Absolute Zero and IPCC reports. These reports contained recommendations which would have a significant impact on people's daily lives such as the closure of all United Kingdom airports by 2050, a 50% reduction in beef and lamb production by 2030 and the phasing out of fossil fuels by 2050. If people's way of life and freedoms

were to be compromised, then it was essential to prove conclusively that this was necessary. Full chart data had to be considered, including ice core sample data which showed CO2 levels much higher than they were now with much higher global temperatures and no detriment to the planet.

Ms Cooper advised the Panel that she was not a climate change denier, and confirmed that climate change did exist, however considered that the onus was on the Council to prove that climate change was man made. Phasing out petrol and diesel would restrict people's freedom to travel, and the Council was asked to confirm the constitutional basis on which it, or central government, was able to act in these respects.

The Panel were advised that a Public Accounts Committee report released recently stated that in the 2 years before Boris Johnson had become Prime Minister there had been £5.5 billion in fraud and waste from government, and in the 2 years following Boris Johnson becoming Prime Minister, this figure had escalated to £21 billion in fraud. It was the job of the electorate to hold government and local authorities to account, and Council Tax payers needed to be happy with the service they were receiving.

The Chair of the Panel confirmed that a full written response to the questions which Ms Cooper had raised would be provided by Officers within 7 working days.

Kemal Cufoglu attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with the Council's Have Your Say! provisions. He was representing the group Pesticide Free Essex (PFE) and the residents of Colchester who had raised concerns about the frequent and dangerous use of pesticides in the streets. In February 2022, PFE had been informed that the Council would work with Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) and the Council's contractor, idverde, to monitor the effect of the new approach being taken by the Council in relation to weed control, and to identify any improvements which may be needed. An alternative herbicide was to be trialled in a specific car park from the beginning of March 2022. In June 2022, PFE had been informed that there had been no increase in complaints or enquiries received via the customer contact team at the Council, implying that the response had been positive. PFE, was however, concerned and asked the Panel the following questions:

1. Without any increase in concerns from residents, why did the City Council move from trialling a non-glyphosate herbicide in a single car park to all hard surfaces across the city?
2. How much money is being spent on Katoun Gold?
3. During which months, at what time of the day and how often is Katoun Gold applied?
4. Was the Panel aware that Katoun Gold's own guidance report explicitly highlights that it is a risk to non-targeted insects and butterflies, and has a moderate risk to earthworms? In 2018 Essex had been identified as a key location for insect habitat management – was the Panel aware of the risk that Katoun Gold posed at this crucial time for biodiversity?
5. On behalf of PFE, he asked whether the Council would make a simple change to its glyphosate ban and expand this to all toxic pesticides to boost the biodiversity of the city.

A Panel member expressed surprise that the Council had not experienced a rise in complaints about weeds, as she had received more complaints on this subject, did Mr Cufoglu have a list of herbicides which he believed did not have a detrimental effect on the environment? Mr Cufoglu confirmed that in 2019 PFE had provided a report to the Council which listed 6 alternatives to glyphosate herbicides, and PFE was more than happy to mobilise its volunteers to carry out hand weeding across the city, but would welcome any support from the Council such as providing simple gadgets to assist, or recognising residents who had contributed. The Panel requested that Mr Cufoglu re-send the PFE report to Officers who would be happy to consider this and then provide a full written response to the questions which had been raised.

Sandy Armitage attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with the Council's Have Your Say! provisions. On 16 May 2023, she had learned via a friend's Facebook page that the pathway weeds in New Town had been sprayed with glyphosate. She, and many others, were horrified to learn of this and the herbicide had been sprayed by an operative on a scooter who was wearing no facemask on a windy day. She had learned that Essex County Council (ECC) was responsible for a lot of the pavements and paths in Colchester and that the preferred weedkiller used by this organisation was glyphosate. She did not understand the need to remove the wildflowers at all at this time, which did no harm and plenty of good. The harms of glyphosate were well known, including its effect as a carcinogen and its deadly effects on vital insects such as bees, and it was suggested that in residential areas the responsibility for keeping streets free of weeds should be returned to the residents. Street weeding days had happened in the past in her street which did not require weed killer. Could such days not be introduced widely for the benefit of all, removing the control of weeds from ECC's and the Council's remit altogether? Could the Council or ECC offer any support or general advice to a community based, non-chemical using weed removal programme?

A Panel member had been made aware of this issue as it had occurred in her ward, and she had sent several emails to ECC on the subject. A recent response had been received from ECC, and this would be shared with Ms Armitage.

Mr Etti attended the meeting and addressed the Panel in accordance with the Council's Have Your Say! provisions. Mr Etti advised the Panel that he did not wish to be present at the meeting, and would rather be spending time with friends and family. However, over the past few years, he considered that there had been a reduction in transparency between government, Councils and residents, and asked in what order these 3 sets of people should be placed?

In discussion, the Panel considered whether the question which had been posed was within its remit, and suggested that a response from a different area of the Council such as Scrutiny Panel or Cabinet may be more suitable.

97. Introduction and Overview of work on Environment and Sustainability

The Panel considered a report introducing the Council's work on tackling the climate emergency and promoting sustainability and outlines upcoming priorities for the year.

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The report before the Panel detailed the Council's progress on reducing its carbon emissions and listed highlights from the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan. The panel was asked to note the report, and questions on its contents were invited.

A Panel member noted that emissions from Council buildings were referenced in the report, but the fact that the Council owned over 6,000 dwellings was not mentioned. Surely the largest volume of emissions came from these dwellings, suggesting a lack of consistency in how the Council presented emission data from its sites. It was suggested that a reduction in emissions from Leisure World would pale in comparison to the emissions from the Council's housing stock. Although projects such as the proposed solar farm and heat network in the Northern Gateway development were listed as highlights in the report, the progress on these projects was questioned, and it was suggested that the report should be clear whether it was considered that referenced projects were, in fact, deliverable by the Council.

The Climate Emergency Project Officer accepted that the Council's housing stock did contribute significantly to emission data, however, this had been accounted for within the Council's emissions targets by recording energy consumption within the communal areas of these buildings. The Council paid for this consumption and this therefore counted as part of the Council's carbon footprint. The rest of the emissions from the dwellings themselves weren't within the Council's carbon footprint in accordance with greenhouse gas reporting protocols. An item on housing and sustainability would be brought to the panel in the future as part of the work programme. Andrew Tyrrell, Head of Public Protection, advised the Panel that the heat network was ready to be built as a standalone project, and had been ready for some time. Borehole testing had confirmed that the project generated the heat and water flows which were required, but if the network were to be constructed now, it would sit idle until associated housing was also completed. Progress on this element of the development was, however, expected this year. With regard to the proposed solar park, planning applications were expected to be submitted in the summer, and it had been demonstrated that the site was viable for a solar park which could assist the Council with offsetting. The project would then be carefully reviewed to ensure that it remained financially viable.

A Panel member noted that they had received multiple complaints from residents about the mowing of areas of grassland which had taken place during 'No Mow May', and the Council had received emailed complaints in regard to this. They wondered whether consideration had been given to the installation of solar panels above car parking spaces, which had been successfully carried out in France. The Head of Public Protection confirmed that this proposal had been considered in the past at specific car parks which unfortunately had not proved to be viable. However, costs and financial viability of these schemes changed over time, and they could be reconsidered in the future.

In discussion, the Panel acknowledged the concerns which had been raised during the course of the meeting by members of the public, and considered that there was merit in having a greater understanding of the supply chains involved in the provision

of green technology. The Council needed to be wary of unintended consequences on the landscape or tourist industry when utilising green technology. The Head of Public Protection confirmed to the Panel that social value was considered as part of the Council's procurement process, which included lifetime carbon emissions including transport but further work may be helpful on this subject in the future.

In response to an enquiry from a Panel member concerning the disposal of boiler equipment which had been removed from Rowan House, the Head of Public Protection confirmed to the Panel that the boilers had been identified as being at the end of their life before the recent refurbishment had taken place, and had in fact broken down during the first winter of the recent lockdown. Funding had already been secured to replace the boilers, and the move to air source heat pumps was entirely appropriate at this time. Additionally, furniture was saved from Rowan House and recycled via a local charity.

A Panel member requested further details of the steps which had been taken to improve energy efficiency in homes in Colchester, and the Climate Emergency Project Officer confirmed that approximately £500,000 of grant funding for increasing energy efficiency had been received over the past 2 years. The funding had mostly been spend on measures such as installing solar panels and insulation in properties, and the Council was looking to work with Community Energy Colchester in the future. A further funding bid had been successful to allow the Council to work with homes which were off the gas grid to improve their energy efficiency, particularly for those on low incomes. When further information was available on this project, it would be circulated to all Councillors.

The Climate Emergency Project Officer confirmed to the Panel that when a new strategy was being developed by the Council, every effort was taken to tie this in to environmental issues or concerns. Comparative data with other local authorities in relation to on air quality was expected to be available shortly.

A Panel member expressed concern that they had not been aware of a local organisation called Market Field Grows who were involved with tree planting, and considered that communications from the Council should be improved to make Councillors more aware of worthy local projects. With regard to tree planting, the last 2 summers had been very dry, and it was suggested that in place of trees, other plants could be offered to residents to plant, which were more drought resistant. The Climate Emergency Project Officer confirmed that the Council had been considering planting trees and other greenery which was more drought resistant or adapted to growing in drier climates, but further information could be provided by the Head of Neighbourhood Services.

In discussion, the Panel was pleased to note that the introduction of goats into the Highwoods Country Park, and wondered whether there were plans to introduce these into other green areas within the city. The use of solar bins in Dedham was noted, and the possibility of introducing these to Colchester City centre was raised to combat overflowing bins. The Climate Emergency Project Officer believed that the goats had been introduced into Highwoods as a trial specifically to graze on the scrub which was there, and other Officers may be better placed to address the question of whether further introductions were planned into different environments.

The possibility of introducing solar bins would require funding, and may be something which was picked up during the development of the Council's new Waste and Recycling Strategy.

The Panel considered that there may be issues in using car parks for the installation of solar panels due to the additional infrastructure that would be required, and noted that the price of electricity fluctuated, which could cause issues with actually generating profits during peak demand times. It was suggested that the Council could consider taking advantage of environmental corporate social responsibility to fund the provision of solar panels on private car parking sites? Simon Davison, Sustainability and Climate Change Manager, considered that this suggestion could be a viable option, and alternative funding streams were being considered by Officers.

Whole life cycle analysis was a developing science, however, some excellent accreditations existed in this area, and he could provide some more detailed information to the Panel and Officers on this subject. In relation to a previous discussion, he considered that retrofitting the Council's housing stock would be extremely expensive and would need to be subject to a cost benefit analysis. The importance of addressing the necessity of de-carbonising could not be understated, and it was essential to achieve the largest emission savings that were possible relative to cost.

RESOLVED that: Colchester City Council's progress on issues of environment and sustainability be noted.

98. Climate Emergency Action Plan Update

The Panel considered a report detailing key progress and updates from actions in the Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP), and other relevant updates since its last meeting on 21 March 2023.

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel in its deliberations.

The Panel noted that a data centre had been used elsewhere in the United Kingdom to help with heating a swimming pool, could this be something which the Council would consider? Officers had already been considering this approach and would provide an update to the Panel in due course.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

99. Work Programme

The Committee considered its draft work programme for 2023-24.

A panel member wished to see on all Council Committee reports a standard item requiring that the sourcing and recycling of any product which was the subject of the report be considered. The Panel did note that whole life cycle analysis was a huge topic, and it would not be practical to require a full analysis as part of every report, but it considered that a suitable summary may be appropriate. It was considered that Committees needed to have as full a picture as possible of all the implications when making a decision, including, for example, the composition of any batteries related to the purchase and whether they contained cobalt or lithium. There was a need to double check the environmental credentials of Council purchases to ensure that reasoned decisions were made.

In light of the discussions which had taken place throughout the meeting, Andrew Tyrrell, Head of Public Protection, considered that it would be appropriate to add an item to the work programme of the Panel at a suitable time which considered life cycle analysis, embodied carbon and end of life disposal. In relation to large capital projects, the Council already had a sustainability checklist which considered environmental impacts, however, this process could be presented to the Panel with examples from the Council's diverse activities, including the procurement process. The Panel would then be in a position to make a recommendation to Cabinet if it considered that there was a need to amend report templates.

RESOLVED that:

- the contents of the work programme be noted.
- An item containing an overview of the Council's procurement process and life cycle analysis to be added to the Panel's work programme for a future meeting.