

LOCAL PLAN COMMITTEE

15 January 2024

<i>Present: -</i>	Councillors T. Young (Chair), Barber, Burrows, Laws, Scordis, Smalls, Smith, and Spindler
<i>Substitute Member: -</i>	Councillor Smalls for Councillor Rippingale Councillor Laws for Councillor Sunnucks
<i>Also in Attendance: -</i>	Councillors Cox, Harris and McLean

294. Colchester City Centre Masterplan – Supplementary Planning Document

At the beginning of the meeting the Chair outlined that they were changing the order of the items on the agenda and would be considering the Colchester City Centre Masterplan – Supplementary Planning Document prior to the General Have Your Say item.

Chris Smith addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that there were concerns regarding the status of Britannia Car Park and its possible closure as it had a lot of value in the community especially to those with reduced mobility. It was noted that there would be a benefit to the Council to have houses on the land however it was agreed by residents that the flat car park provided a unique offering especially for elderly people that was different to the other enclosed car parks in the City. The speaker concluded by asking whether the City Centre Masterplan could be modified to keep it intact.

Nick Chilvers addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that there had been claims of thousands of responses when in fact there had only been just over a hundred with 26 people going on record with 92 people opposing the proposal and 14 people supporting with the negative points being rebutted and therefore not being up for discussion. It was heard that there were no physical contributions from Councillors within the report and queried whether the Cabinet decision on this was behind closed doors and queried whether Ward Councillors knew what was happening. The Committee heard that the usual comments would be made and congratulations would be given to all involved and asked that Councillors are properly consulted on the issues.

Sir Bob Russell addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that none of the consultants from We Made That were in attendance at the meeting and that this was shameful. The Committee heard that the speaker had spent 12 hours reviewing the original draft masterplan and final one that was now in front of the Committee which had cost £130,000 and endorsed the previous speakers and detailed that no financial impact assessment had been submitted with the report. The Committee heard that the report was anti-car and noted that 65% of people who visited Colchester travelled by car and only 4.9% travelled by bicycle and that if Britannia car

park was lost then there would be a loss of over £800,000. The speaker detailed that the Membership of the bingo club was greater than any of the political parties in Colchester and asked that the Committee defer the item so that an economic impact assessment could be undertaken.

Clare Marsh addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that they had concerns about the proposals at St Botolphs Circus and that the proposals there would cause massive disruption with the outcome being a series of compromises and questioned whether the Committee really wanted to sign something off that wasn't right. The speaker detailed that the Masterplan had been validated by pseudo consultants and detailed that the responses had been universally negative and asked Members of the Committee not to confuse levelling up with gentrification and not take the temptation of funds with many strings attached. The speaker concluded by detailing that the proposal could create a large mess, discourage cars and be less efficient for all with trees in planters and detailed that there needed to be an inclusive duty to be careful with the City.

Sam Good (Colchester BID) addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that they were grateful for the changes that had been made in the City Centre Masterplan including a more important stance on retail and referenced the future research vision as there was a lack of detail regarding the Rapid Transit System. The Committee heard that at a recent meeting it had been raised that employees in low paying jobs were struggling and that if the City centre was inaccessible then employers would not be able to recruit and sustain businesses as they will travel elsewhere. The Committee heard that if there was excess parking within Colchester then it should be viewed as how to fill the spaces.

John Burton (Civic Society) addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that the Civic Society had been disappointed with the result that was being presented to the Committee and detailed that there needed to be a better financial assessment and asked that the item be deferred to review the financial implications further. The Committee heard that the plan had not looked at the City as a whole and detailed that the Civic Society believed that the whole city needed to be master planned. The Committee heard that the speaker had seen the objections to Crouch Street and East Hill and queried the cycle path usage and why that route had been chosen. The Committee were asked not to approve the proposal before them until a comprehensive masterplan of the entire city had been completed.

Dorian Kelly addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that the proposal before them was a masterplan in everything but name and detailed that Colchester received a large amount of income through tourism and that Colchester was the biggest settlement in the region apart from Norwich. Concern was raised regarding the employment in the city and that it had been assumed incorrectly that there was a framework for the future in the document and that it only contained additional bus lanes and cycle lanes and that more needed to be added to encourage people to visit Colchester.

Councillor Dave Harris addressed the Committee as a visiting Councillor. The Committee heard that the masterplan referred to the proposed Middlewick development on p14 of the document and referred to it in passing as part of the jigsaw of development within the City and detailed that it should not be included in the plan and confirmed that they had appealed to the Ministry of Defence (MOD). The speaker concluded by asking the Committee to review the document and not include Middlewick into the Masterplan.

Councillor Sam McLean addressed the Committee as a visiting Councillor. The Committee heard that the outline of the proposals were good but there needed to be a proper vision for the Roman Circus and raised concerns over sight lines not being protected in the city for historic buildings such as Jumbo. Further concerns were raised by speakers on the 4-storey limit of buildings and whether that their dream was that Colchester could have a tram system. The speaker detailed they welcomed cycling routes and would like to see these expanded and asked officers to be ambitious such as other cities in Europe where they had pedestrianised areas.

Councillor Pam Cox addressed the Committee as a visiting Councillor. The Committee heard that the City centre masterplan created a framework for future development detailed their concerns regarding the Roman Circus and the Painters Yard and that more needed to be made of these areas.

Simon Cairns, Joint Head of Planning, presented the report to the Committee outlining that the masterplan was unique to Colchester and was designed to promote economic growth and to create a multi modal way to enter the City Centre. The Joint Head of Planning detailed that the proposal was not anti-car and that its overall aim was to enhance the city's economy. The Committee heard that there was a need to steward sustainable development and that this had been achieved through partnership working. It was noted that the responses to the consultation were contained with the report and that there had been a lot of engagement but asked Members to note that this document was a guide and not an action plan, that the transport plan was not being considered for adoption, and that the plan needed to be read in the context of other plans and the whole of the historic City Centre. The Committee heard that the document included biodiversity enhancement and greening of the city centre, as well as references to the Active Travel Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) and the Colchester Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan. The Committee heard that further work was required concerning the detail of future redevelopment sites but confirmed that the Masterplan had been amended to support the key retail uses of the area and confirmed that development on Britannia car park was a long-standing commitment and that neutral effects of that development on car parking provision needed to be demonstrated. It was noted that planning applications would need to justify their approach to development and that there was a danger that a design guide could be a blunt instrument and detailed that individual assessments would be required. The Joint Head of Planning detailed that the changes to contraflows in the High Street and any future proposals would require further transportation assessments and modelling and confirmed that references to the River Colne were shown as biodiversity enhancements. It was noted that the St Botolphs Circus junction and roundabout proposal would have improved crossing points and connectivity with the southern hinterland and that further clarification was provided on the proposed Roman Wall Park. The Joint Head of Planning concluded by detailing that the Supplementary Planning Document added value to the planning process and ensured that the best form of new developments came forward whilst supporting sustainable growth in a transparent manner.

Matthew Brown, Economic Regeneration Manager continued the presentation and outlined that the SPD would improve the city centre and drive the vibrancy around the City's assets of its heritage as well as making safer kerb-less streets and improving the journey into the City Centre from rail links. It was noted that there were other improvements around the City which included the proposals at Holy Trinity Church to restore the building and ensure its future. The presentation concluded with the Economic Regeneration Manager detailing that there was a focus on St Botolphs as it needed the most rejuvenation.

At the request of the Chair, Ian Turner, Principal Transportation and Infrastructure Planner for Essex County Council detailed that the St Botolphs junction was a highway dominant

area and did not provide an attractive gateway into the City and was as a barrier to movements. The Committee heard that the new scheme would look to address the public open space and connectivity for all users and provide a foundation for further bus travel changes. The speaker detailed that it was proposed works would be within Highways owned land which would include planting areas as well as full signalisation which would help improve air quality in the area. It was noted that the Rapid Transit System (RTS) would connect up different areas of the city and would aid shoppers and employees and provide better links across the city to areas including Greenstead, the Garden Community development and the University.

The Committee queried the highways proposals and whether this would take into account the growth across the City, the need for a bus station, the proposed layout of St Botolphs junction, and that there was concern that the project at St Botolphs could be shelved like a previous proposal in Crouch Street.

At the request of the Chair the Principal Transportation and Infrastructure Planner responded that there were concerns regarding a loss of parking and confirmed that there was an intention to look at those locations in further detail. The speaker detailed that there was funding in place to secure the proposal and to remove the barriers that did discriminate with regards to accessibility as well as promoting safety. The Principal Transportation and Infrastructure Planner concluded by detailing that there was a good level of commitment to the project so it was unlikely to be shelved.

Members debated the proposal with some of the Committee detailing their disappointment that the RTS to the University and Greenstead had started works and that local Councillors had not been informed of this as planting was being removed which would lead to increased flooding. Additionally it was raised that the link road did not properly link into the network.

At the request of the Chair the Principal Transportation and Infrastructure Planner responded that the new RTS Bus Lane would not be linked to the RTS system and currently advanced works were taking place and detailed that letters had been sent to residents and that the webpage had been updated and confirmed that there was an intention to improve the communications strategy and that there was a plan to brief Councillors ahead of the main works taking place.

At the request of the Chair the Joint Head of Planning (Simon Cairns) responded to questions and detailed that the development of Britannia Car park was not based on financial return and that there was a longstanding commitment to enhance the setting of the area and a sense of arrival. It was confirmed that policy TC3 stated that there should be a neutral effect on car parking.

At the request of the Chair Head of Parking (Richard Walker) detailed that there were many variables in the historic core of the City and that the Council had access to data back to 2007 and detailed that every surface car park was a development in waiting and that Britannia Car Park was part of the parking strategy as it did put traffic onto St Botolphs junction. The Committee heard that getting the mixture of parking across the City right was a challenge and detailed that the new strategy for parking would be circulated in February or March of 2024. It was confirmed that most of the vulnerable parking would remain and that a proportion would be reserved for accessible spaces with the anticipation that new car parks would be coming on stream as part of the regeneration process. It was confirmed that part of the modelling was to get the balance and mix correct with the placement of long stay and short stay in the right places.

At the request of the Chair the Joint Head of Planning (Simon Cairns) detailed that with

regards to engagement, an extremely comprehensive approach had been undertaken as part of the Masterplan Strategy and this detail is set out in the Masterplan involving (pages 24-27) collaboration during the drafting phase and upon the draft document with stakeholders. Further engagement had also been undertaken following closure of the consultation period to address perceived shortcomings. Committee Members were asked to note that an exceptionally large amount of engagement had taken place with a 6-week consultation period undertaken on the draft involving both in person and digital channels. Diverse and comprehensive engagement had been undertaken with hard-to-reach groups including youth groups as well as involving the sixth form college, the Alzheimer's society as well as the Civic Society with a silent majority supporting the proposal. Further to this it was noted that Members had been consulted through a direct steering group and addressed the concerns regarding the Financial Impact Assessment and confirmed that it had received input from economic specialists and did not seek to create new policies but hung from existing ones in the adopted local plan.

At the request of the Chair the Joint Head of Planning (Karen Syrett) detailed that the masterplan would be a newer document and that different sites had been mentioned and confirmed that when these came forward there would be specific project appraisals.

At the request of the Chair the Joint Head of Planning (Simon Cairns) detailed that the SPD had an emphasis on retailing and that it was car-lite but was not a complete pedestrianisation with the RTS providing relief to congestion whilst redesigning the parking provision to ensure it is optimally located and scaled to drive footfall. It was noted that any changes to Tollgate would need to be looked at as part of the Local Plan Review and detailed that Local Cycling and Walking Investment Plan (LCWIP) 4 had been subject to its own public consultation and was not part of the document that was before the Committee. The Committee heard that the masterplan was not just a list of stuff and that there was a large amount of detail and that there was further work to do with regards to tourism and the granularity of the issues that the SPD mentioned. The Joint Head of Planning detailed that the Council had a duty to deliver housing and that Middlewick was outside the scope of the document. It was noted that the plan included a strategy to knit the City centre back together and that the protection of skylines would rely on individual site assessments and that storey height limits would be proposed instead of height limits. The Committee heard that further analysis needed to be undertaken on cycle routes and that wayfinding for areas of interest could be looked into further.

Prior to the break the Joint Head of Planning (Karen Syrett) detailed that the Council had never done so much consultation and engagement and said that it was disappointing that some speakers had felt that this wasn't the case and that there had been calls to defer. The Joint Head of Planning concluded by detailing that they had not heard anything from speakers that would require a deferral and that there was no requirement to shut Buzz Bingo.

A short break was taken between 19:47-19:55.

Members debated the proposal before the Committee on the issues including: that cycling numbers were low but further infrastructure was needed to encourage cycling and provide people a choice of transport, that the document would be making the most of Colchester's Heritage and queried what could be done to protect roman mosaics from contractors, as well as what could be done with Middlemill since its collapse.

At the request of the Chair The Joint Head of Planning (Simon Cairns) responded to the points raised and detailed that utilities had statutory rights and did not have to get consent for works and would be within the remit of Historic England to raise concerns over underground mosaics. With regards to Biodiversity and Middlemill it was noted that there

were options of what could be done and that officers could consult with the Colchester Natural History Society on a level of activity that is acceptable.

Members continued to debate the proposal on issues including: that the proposal was a compromise of all views across the Council as well as a foundation going forward, that the Council did not own all the assets and could not shut down businesses, that some Members felt that there should be more emphasis on a transport interchange. Members continued to debate the junction capacities across the City as well as further pedestrianisation of areas and noted that the Council did not own all the car parking spaces in the City.

Debate continued with some Members detailing that they had had bad experiences cycling in Colchester with a Member detailing that they had been hit off their bike and others having near misses. Members detailed that there were transport problems with some issues arising from bus companies, that there would be improvements to accessibility to St Botolphs, and that Britannia Car Park was a site allocation in the adopted Local Plan. It was noted by some Members that a bus station interchange would be preferable.

Members discussed the feedback from the consultation regarding cycling and how it could be made more inclusive within the City as well as how the car parks could be used and adapted. At the request of the Chair, the Head of Parking detailed that Priory Street Car park had won awards and that it was a challenge to find different sites and that officers were looking to see what could be done to enhance them.

The Committee continued to debate the proposal on issues including the need for a cultural shift and the need to make venues more accessible within the City in conjunction with the use of blue badge parking. The Head of Parking detailed that they would take away the points from the meeting.

RESOLVED (UNANIMOUSLY) That the Local Plan Committee adopted the City Centre Masterplan as a Supplementary Planning Document.

And

That the Local Plan Committee revoked the St Botolphs Quarter Masterplan (2005) and the Better Town Centre SPD (2012) as both were superseded by the City Centre Masterplan. These also predated national and local planning policy.

295. Have Your Say!

Richard Kilshaw addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that the evidence base for Middlewick was outdated and included examples that were incorrect such as references to Minsmere. The Committee heard that there were other omissions in that the mitigation land proposed for the biodiversity was not arable and detailed that they would like to see the Middlewick site removed from the Local Plan. The speaker outlined that the flawed Stantec report should mean that the Middlewick site should be removed on the basis of flawed information and asked how it could be removed from the development plan based on these reasons.

At the request of the Chair the Joint Head of Planning (Karen Syrett) responded that the Council had received a lot of information on biodiversity issues and that this deserved proper consideration and a comprehensive response. The Committee heard that there was a plan

making process that the Council had to follow and that there could be a focussed review but that would not be straightforward and detailed that there was little merit in doing one for Middlewick as the best avenue was through the Local Plan review. It was noted that further Ecological surveys would be taking place and that officers had been taking suggestions from the En-Form group regarding ecologists.

In response to a follow-up comment from Richard Kilshaw the Joint Head of Planning Confirmed that the Middlewick allocation could not just be removed from the Local Plan.

Dougal Urqhart addressed the Committee pursuant to provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5 (1). The Committee heard that the importance of the statement read at the meeting last month regarding Middlewick and detailed that there were 30 reasons why the original plan for the site and the Stantec report were not credible. The committee heard that the statement was signed by the Essex field club who had undertaken some survey work and that the speaker had also surveyed some of the site. The speaker concluded by detailing that Members should have due regard for the letter from Natural England and queried whether it could be classed as an SSSI and that it was an important local amenity space.