

# STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

## 8 FEBRUARY 2011

*Present :-* Councillor Christopher Arnold (Chairman)  
Councillors Nigel Chapman, Mark Cory, Andrew Ellis,  
Bill Frame, Theresa Higgins, Gerard Oxford,  
Dennis Willetts and Julie Young

*Substitute Member :-* Councillor Jon Manning for Councillor Nigel Offen

*Also in Attendance :-* Councillor Nick Barlow  
Councillor Lyn Barton  
Councillor Beverley Oxford  
Councillor Paul Smith

### **35. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2011 were confirmed as a correct record.

### **36. Review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Sustainability**

Councillor Lyn Barton, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Sustainability gave an overview of her work over the last twelve months.

Councillor Barton spoke about the recognised problems within the Planning Service, and that a Development Improvement Plan has been introduced for the service. Council representatives recently met with key players and agents in the planning process who highlighted the problems of feeling isolated, a lack of communication with officers not responding to telephone calls or emails. The problems at that time had been exacerbated by long term sickness of three principle planning officers and the initial drop in planning resources during the implementation of the fundamental service review (FSR).

Improvements are noticeable now that the post FSR structure has bedded-in, and the re-introduction of the Agents Forum, with new website communications link has improved communications, with positive feedback from customers. The re-launch of the Parish Council Planning Workshops, now extended and improved, has also proved successful, fitting in with the new Localism agenda, and these meetings will continue to be monitored for feedback, with issues being considered before the appropriate action is taken.

In response to Councillor Willetts, Councillor Barton said the quality of service is paramount, with customer relationships an important aspect of quality. The views of customers, complainants and Ward Councillors will be sought on specific applications, and consultation to a wider audience, including all Councillors, stakeholders and customers in regards to the overall service. The overall service consultation is expected to be undertaken in February and will be an important exercise in considering issues prior to forming an opinion, before any appropriate action is taken. Councillor

Barton agreed to share with Panel members the draft consultation Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire. In regards to charging for development control advice and guidance, Councillor Barton said the service provided advice and guidance to more than one hundred customers per month, and a disproportionate amount of officer time was spent on this work, given it did not generate any income. Councillor Barton confirmed the new charging policy had not proved to be an issue, with all enquirers prepared to pay and no tailing off of pre-application advice.

In response to Councillor Julie Young, Councillor Barton said the Planning Service understands things need to be done differently, and this has been a learning process, and 'good practice' examples are taken on board, putting right problems and moving forward. Councillor Barton confirmed to Councillor Arnold that in respect of Planning Applications, the tracking was now more rigorous, with more regular officer meetings to address any potential problems and senior officers are now more confident that planning targets will be attained. Councillor Frame said good progress on website access to planning applications had been achieved in the last year, and the ability to put planning applications on-line within one day of receipt had proved a difficult process to introduce and with blips along the way, but the process is now working.

Councillor Barton responded to Councillor Ellis and Chapman, confirming she had initiated the Local Heritage List, a list of town centre buildings either of historic value or of particular affection to local people, but not necessarily listed. The list, put together through volunteered help and some officer time, would help on pre-application advice but did not have any legal standing. Councillor Barton said this listing would be rolled out to other urban or rural areas if there was enough demand and expert officers would be happy to assist in setting up such a list(s).

In regard to Planning Policy and the Core Strategy 2012, Councillor Barton told Councillor Ellis that with the current strategy now having less than two years still to run and with no processes in place since the last core strategy review, the Council needed to remain flexible, and this was an opportune time to undertake a review, no harm could come of this and it could prove very helpful. Councillor Barton accepted the review may probably show Colchester needs to build more houses, that is, the acceleration rate would increase above the current 830 houses per annum to meet demand. Councillor Barton said residents will have the opportunity to express their view and she remained open-minded about the outcomes of such a review, with no pre-conceptions. Councillor Barton said the Council needed to interact with the public on this issue, but how any outcomes are managed may prove difficult.

In respect of the implementation of the Nottingham Declaration objectives, Councillor Barton said phase 1 was complete, and phase 2 was fully funded, with a total CO2 omissions saving of 1,089 tonnes. Councillor Barton agreed with Councillor Arnold that if the 'Feed-in Tariff Scheme' was to be introduced to Wellington House and Rowan House before the 31 March 2011 deadline it needed to be started immediately. Councillor Barton said in respect of the initiative on generating energy through Wind Turbines, the Boxted Parish Council presentation of one year ago had been followed by a further review at Myland Parish Council in November 2010. Progress had been slow but remains on-going.

Councillor Barton said Photo Voltaic Panels (PVP) could prove a very effective way of reducing carbon omissions, and whilst this was an expensive option, it is a good scheme for Colchester, believing the Council had to be seen leading on this initiative. Councillor Barton agreed with Councillor Frame that Council owned buildings should be at the forefront of any development of this initiative. Councillor Gerard Oxford said whilst he understood the effectiveness of PVP the Council needed to get their priorities right, and believed the savings on reducing heating bills through the installation of double or triple glazing far outweighed the benefits of PVP. Councillor Oxford said he had requested costing information on glazing installations at a Finance and Audit Scrutiny meeting in 2010.

In respect of regeneration, Councillor Barton responded to Councillor Manning by explaining the area known as the Cultural Quarter was that area to the east of Queen Street / St Botolphs Street, stretching from the new Magistrates Court Building at St Botolphs Roundabout northwards to those buildings, including the Minorities Building, fronting onto East Hill. The regeneration of St Botolphs Station and development of the Station Square are currently in the design process stage, and the area around the historic Priory site now had wider paths, with access for the disabled, new seating and public open space. The acquisition of the Old Police Station would become a base for the proposed new Creative Business Centre Hub in the town centre, with the redevelopment of a new hotel on the site of the to-be demolished St James House and Roman House properties. Development of a new hotel would commence soon and work would also start soon on the landscaping around the Firstsite building.

Councillor Barton agreed to share with Councillors the design of the St Botolphs Station and Station Square once they are completed and prior to going out to public consultation.

In response to Councillor Ellis, Councillor Barton said the regeneration of the Vineyard Gate area had understandably stalled due to the economic downturn, but the original preferred partner in this redevelopment are in regular contact with the Council and remain committed to the project. There remained no obligation on the Council to remain with the current preferred partner. The future focus will be on what is needed for this area and will to some extent determine the profile of the preferred partner(s).

Councillor Barton understood Councillor Chapman's concern that with the main focus on these regeneration sites, attention to areas such as the Town Centre High Street can slip, and some areas are now starting to look tatty, in need of improvement, with an emphasis needed on reducing poor air quality due to the high level of carbon omissions from poor public transport. Councillor Ellis said stricter monitoring on omission levels on buses is needed. Councillor Barton said traffic orders are due at the end of February for alterations to the North Hill in respect of Bus Lanes, and alterations to the Bus Lay-bys in the High Street. Consideration is also being given to broadening the High Street disabled parking scheme, all part of the start of regenerating this area. Councillor Barton understood this work will disrupt the current road network, but she and officers are working closely with Essex County Council on this initiative.

Councillor Barton agreed with Councillor Willetts that continual lobbying of Essex

County Council in respect of improving the Borough's Transport Strategy was needed, with a need for better quality public transport for the rural areas. Such meetings do take place and she reassured the Panel that the needs of the Borough are fed back to County.

Councillor Arnold thanked Councillor Barton for attending the meeting and responding to questions from the Panel. Councillor Barton agreed to share with Panel members the draft consultation Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire.

**Councillor Bill Frame (in respect of being a Board Member of the Colne Housing Group) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)**

**Councillor Theresa Higgins (in respect of being the Chairman of Colchester's YMCA) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)**

### **37. Revenues and Benefits Fundamental Service Review - Update**

#### **Presentation**

Mr. Charles Warboys, Head of Resource Management and Mr. Paul McMorris, Finance Manager attended the meeting and Mr. Warboys presented the Revenues and Benefits Fundamental Service Review (FSR) report.

Mr. Warboys said that following the review of the FSR Business Case endorsed by the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel and approved by Cabinet in March 2010, excellent progress has been made in implementing the Business Case.

October to December 2010 saw the Revenue and Benefits Service go through a major redeployment project resulting in all the appointments to the final April 2012 structure being made. Some additional posts have also been filled on an interim basis. The final restructure has resulted in a reduction of twenty five full time equivalent (FTE) posts, with six compulsory redundancies and the remaining losses through natural wastage and voluntary redundancies.

A training programme for generic benefits and taxation work is underway, with new methods of working now in place, and staff are being supported through 1:1s with line management, team meetings and the Human Resources staff.

A new way of working has seen experienced assessors working in the Customer Services Centre on the front line, on a rota basis, enabling staff to solve problems at the first point of contact and avoid delay by being passed to the "back office". E-Claims had not been fully launched, though to date 686 claims have been processed in this way. Although further software improvements are imminent, new claims are still being processed within 5-6 working days, in cases where all the evidence and information is provided with the initial application. Mr. Warboys mentioned the on-line

calculator which allows potential claimants to see for themselves whether they are likely to be entitled to benefit. The Council's major partners in this line of work have been contacted and most are now engaged in this new way of working.

Mr. Warboys concluded by saying the financial savings as anticipated in the Business Case, are on track, and an additional saving of £369,000 per annum has been built into the 2011/12 Budget, with every indication that the anticipated savings from 2012/13 onwards will be around £700,000.

### **General discussions**

Whilst reassured of the progress made with the implementation of the March 2010 Business Case to date, and the high-level risks associated with the review being actively managed, Councillor Willetts was surprised that the update report whilst showing savings far beyond those originally anticipated, did not give any detail on how the savings were linked to the business case actions. Mr. Warboys said he understood the point being made and this could be addressed in any further follow-up report. The assessment of the savings was based on a mechanistic approach, based on the overall FTE staff saved in the process, and not broken down into smaller component parts, though a large proportion of the additional savings have been through the removal of a supervisory / management layer of the original structure.

Councillor Arnold asked how the overpayment recovery actions were progressing and Mr Warboys replied that recovery of £300k had been made to date, against a budget of £260k.

Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Diversity addressed the Panel to thank those officers who had been instrumental in delivering this project within the allocated timeframe and with additional savings. Councillor Smith also paid tribute to all the staff within the Revenues and Benefits Service, commended for their hard work and dedication in ensuring the success of the new operation.

The Chairman thanked Officers for attending the meeting, presenting the report and responding to questions from Members of the Panel.

*RESOLVED* that the Panel commented on and noted the progress being made in implementing the FSR of Colchester's Revenues and Benefits Service.

**Councillor Theresa Higgins (in respect of being a Member of Colchester Town's Share the Space Group) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)**

**Councillor Nigel Chapman (in respect of being the Chairman of the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Project) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)**

**38. Review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development,**

## **Culture and Tourism**

Councillor Nick Barlow, Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Culture and Tourism gave an overview of some of the major work in which he was involved in during the last twelve months.

Councillor Barlow said he was involved in regular meetings with the Colchester Business Group, formed in 2008 to provide a collective voice for the local business community, and represented by the Colchester Chamber of Commerce, The Colchester branches of the Federation of Small Businesses and Institute of Directors, along with destination Colchester, Colchester Business Enterprise Agency, Severalls Business Park, Colchester 2020 and Colchester Borough Council. The Group believe Firstsite will enable Colchester to become an internationally important destination for the visual arts and an important social hub for the town, as well as fulfilling the high-end requirements of the business community.

The Christmas Group was formed in 2010 to coordinate a programme of events and contribute to projects such as the commissioning of a new town centre Christmas lighting project over three years. The Group, with the Council as the major partner meets to co-ordinate and manage such projects that help promotes Colchester to visitors and support business and retailers.

Councillor Barlow was involved in the Digital Strategy, including universal agreement for the need for the next generation of Broadband to Colchester. It is envisaged that the development of Broadband in the Town Centre will enable wireless broadband to be networked across rural areas of the Borough. Councillor Barlow was working alongside Councillor Barton in the provision of the Creative Business Centre Hub in the town centre. Councillor Barlow later confirmed to Councillor Willetts that the high speed broadband initiative was looking to provide this facility across rural areas as well as urban areas. It was intended to provide microwave links, transmitting from the top of high-ground buildings within the town centre to a network of hubs across rural areas and out to other locations. This would provide better opportunities for business and employment in rural areas. This formed part of a collaborative effort with partners with the expertise to deliver.

Councillor Barlow mentioned that the Museums Service and Arts Service are now in the throes of Fundamental Service Reviews (FSR). The separate arts review is a collaboration between the Colchester's arts partners Firstsite, The Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre and the Council, looking to bring together aspects of work that will enhance the service provided and reduce costs. The future funding to these organisations was been considered, looking to see how best they could align with the organisational needs. Councillor Barlow later said as a result of the review, he would like to see all three arts organisations work in collaboration on arts community development work across the Borough. In response to Councillor Arnold, Ms. Pam Donnelly said the Museum Services FSR had commenced, and whilst questions have been raised in respect of Governance and the Joint Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service, confirmed that there was no reason why the FSR Business Case could not be programmed into the Panel's 2011/12 Work Programme.

In response to Councillor Theresa Higgins, Councillor Barlow said the Cycle Colchester project is working within a strategy designed to encourage cycling in Colchester and forms the rationale behind the town's programme of work in support of Cycling projects and initiatives that will develop the cycling network and improve conditions for cycling, for example, the February 2011 consultation on the proposal to allow cycling on the riverside path within the Lower Castle Park.

In response to Councillor Arnold, Councillor Barlow confirmed that in respect of the Tymperleys building, the Council was now working in partnership with North East Essex Preservation Trust (NEEPT), looking at different ideas for the future of the building and alternative ways of displaying the Colchester Clock Collection and other museum artefacts, for example 'Virtual Museum'. The NEEPT work in partnership with the National Trust and are far better equipped to successfully manage the building that would remain in Council ownership. Meetings with the NEEPT continue.

Councillor Barlow confirmed to Councillor Arnold that the 2012 Tourism Team had been formed to consider ways of capturing the tourism boom from the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. A major exhibition from China is being organised by the Museum Service for display at the Castle immediately following the summer Olympics. Councillor Barlow said there was little funding for organising events, though there remained a lot of enthusiasm to continue the community led 'Free Festival' into 2011 and 2012. It was also hoped the Roman Circus would be developed further, for greater tourist attraction, though this had been jeopardised by the failed lottery bid. Officers are working with the Archaeological Trust to find ways of enhancing this site, making it something that visitors and local people would want to visit. It is anticipated the Roman Circus will form part of a virtual display at the Castle Museum, to graphically illustrate the history of the Circus.

Councillor Chapman believed the Council remained introspective in respect of tourism, that the rural areas of the Borough offered so much more, that could provide an experience to visitors that encouraged them to stay longer, with the knock-on effect of increasing income to the area. Councillor Barlow recognised that by encouraging visitors to short stays, not just day trips, would dramatically increase spending, and the Business Enterprise team are working with hotel and tourism groups in an effort to get the public to know Colchester better. Councillor Barlow confirmed that Firstsite are collaborating with The Tate to provide a major Constable exhibition to Colchester.

At the conclusion of the discussions, Councillor Barlow expressed his thanks to the officers within the service areas of his portfolio for their continued hard work and dedication.

Councillor Arnold thanked Councillor Barlow for attending the meeting and responding to questions from the Panel.

### **39. Work Programme**

At the recent Group Spokespersons briefing, requests were received from Councillor Cory and Councillor Offen for future reviews to be undertaken by the Panel. The Group

Spokespersons agreed that the Panel would undertake a review of Highways and Transportation in the Borough, more specifically, an Overview of Public Transport in the Borough and Highways Maintenance in the Borough in relation to pot holes and gritting. An invitation to attend this review will go to Councillor Hume, Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transportation at Essex County Council and representatives from the leading public transport companies in Colchester.

*RESOLVED* that the Panel agreed the current work programme with the above review added as an additional item for future scrutiny.