

# Policy Panel

Wednesday, 29 November 2023

**Attendees:** Councillor Kevin Bentley, Councillor Jocelyn Law, Councillor Sam McCarthy, Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell, Councillor Rhys Smithson, Councillor Julie Young  
**Apologies:** Councillor Sue Lissimore  
**Substitutes:** Councillor William Sunnucks (for Councillor Sue Lissimore)

## 86 Minutes of Previous Meeting

*RESOLVED* that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 September 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

## 87 Future of Sports and Leisure Strategy [verbal update]

Mr Chilvers addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1), to argue that fitness and leisure activities did not just happen at dedicated premises and give his view that too much time and money was being spent on the Northern Gateway sports facilities. Mr Chilvers explained that he had previously used Leisure World, before moving to a commercial gym and spa, and asked whether sport and leisure provision would be more reactive to needs in the future. Mr Chilvers argued that the Council should not try to guide people's health and fitness efforts and to reduce the health and fitness services it provided.

Rory Doyle, Associate Director of Alliance Integrated Strategic Partnerships, gave assurance that the briefing would cover much of what Mr Chilvers had asked. The Associate Director gave a verbal update, explaining that the National approach was to review and reframe the public sector sports and leisure offer. Sports England and DCN had published a review on leisure provision and the roles played by councils, alongside the contribution this made to wellbeing and health. Challenges were presented by operating in a post-Covid situation whilst trying to decarbonise. Local authorities were challenged to think differently now that previous models had become unsustainable. There had been a clear steer to expand offers and focus on active wellbeing services, creating healthier, more active communities with alignment in place-based ambitions. The current financial model for Colchester was unsustainable, with facilities having a high cost, especially the pool and facilities at Leisure World, which was also the largest source of emissions in the Council's portfolio.

Transformational work was needed to create a sustainable model for the future, with feedback having noted a lack of clarity and purpose in the current model, with some feedback stating that the Council did not currently have a holistic view. The Associate Director highlighted the importance of services to tackle health inequalities and the need to better understand barriers to fitness, with improved data to show the social value provided by services, collected by working with communities to understand needs. Work with stakeholders was discussed, including in the health services, to create a wider health offering in partnership with others. Services provided needed to have a positive and measurable impact on Colchester. Resources were needed to

create a transformed model, with project management support which was being sought, as this could not be provided in-house at a sufficient level. The transformational work needed was linked to the Council's asset management strategy and moves to the corporate landlord model. Local authorities across the country were looking at similar challenges and had a good record of collaboration with other organisations. The Council was working with Wolseley on proposals as to what could be improved and to map out what investment may be required. Outreach work was carried out within communities and with other parts of the UK to gain ideas. Sport England funding was being sought to help develop this further.

The Panel discussed various parts of the Council's leisure offer, including the facilities in Tiptree and the plans for the Heart of Greenstead project. A large concentration of the Council's work had been in Castle, New Town and Mile End wards. A Panel member argued that there was a good opportunity for a workshop session to work on future priorities. Another Panel member praised the proposed approach and urged cooperation with other local authorities, including town and parish councils, and shared service potential with neighbouring districts to identify what to offer, whilst avoiding duplication.

Concern was raised by one Panel member as to the size of Leisure World Tiptree being too small, and the cost associated with use of the main Leisure World site in Colchester, including charges for parking in comparison to other leisure venues with free parking. The potential competition with other providers was raised as a concern.

The Associate Director was asked what numbers of residents there were who exercised by dog walking, and whether dog agility equipment could be provided for this, which would also encourage responsible dog ownership, potentially linked into the Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy, along with potential for wild swimming if water is clean enough. A Panel member asked whether money from Section 106 agreements could be used to provide equipment, and whether residents across all wards would be consulted before the Sport and Leisure Strategy comes back to Policy Panel for review. The Assistant Director agreed with the points made on Section 106 funding and the importance of locality regarding assets, working with partners and communities.

The Panel considered the corporate landlord model being pursued by the Council, considering which services cost money and which funded themselves. The Assistant Director was asked whether the social value of services/activities had been calculated and the location of problems ascertained. Concern was raised that the approach proposed would take time and a Panel member urged swifter action and consideration of the issues at play. The Assistant Director informed the Panel that granular work was being carried out to examine sites and services, with Leisure World as the best performing site. More could be done to maximise social value provided and new software had been purchased to show who was using each element of the Council's assets and services. The challenge to work quickly was accepted, balanced by the need to not lose a strategic view.

A Panel member argued that Leisure World had always been the more affordable option, compared to comparable private sector facilities and that, with the cost of living crisis, the private sector alternatives were unaffordable for many residents.

The Panel discussed the link between physical and mental wellbeing, and the importance of a place-based and asset-based strategy for providing sport and leisure options, giving a sense of community, a place for people to come together, and a home for sports clubs. The Assistant Director agreed and highlighted that Adam Britton, Head of Sport and Leisure, had a rich background in private sector sport and leisure provision, and was examining where the Council needed to position itself to have maximum impact, deliver pilot work and to connect with partners and provide activities in partnership. The Head of Sport and Leisure described the sense checking on what the private sector offer was, noting that private sector providers either charged at a higher rate than the Council, or at a lower rate that was based on levying multiple charges. The private sector was a competitive market, and the Head of Sport and Leisure explained that his work would be to take a community based approach to the Council's sport and leisure offer, rather than an asset based approach.

In response to questions as to what services the Council should be providing, and one Panel member's view that the Council should only provide sport and leisure options which did not compete with private sector alternatives, the Assistant Director emphasised the question as to who the Council was looking to support, and which public sector partners it would want to support. The Assistant Director was keen to have elected members conduct site visits, which would be facilitated as soon as possible, expected in the next municipal year. The importance of involving elected members was stressed, linking in to their communities and to gain necessary feedback.

*RECOMMENDED* to CABINET that: -

- a) A workshop be organised for all Elected Members on the Future of Sports and Leisure
- b) All Elected Members be invited to engagement events for the future Sports and Leisure Strategy

*RESOLVED* that an update be returned to the Policy Panel on the future of Sports and Leisure Strategy at its meeting scheduled for 6 March 2024 and that officers will consider the interdependencies with other strategies.

## **88 Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Policy**

Councillor Natalie Sommers, Portfolio Holder for Communities, introduced the Policy. The Council was subject to the equality duty and aimed to go beyond this to cover diversity within its policies, supporting colleagues and residents, reflecting the People Strategy. There were areas where improvements could be made, which were being identified by staff surveys and meetings with managers. The Policy was being reviewed, an Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity [EDI] Group had been created and set in the context of a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

Jess Douglas, Head of People, underlined equality and diversity as a priority for the Council, reflected in its vision. Inclusivity was a priority, including safe working spaces, tackling discrimination and providing services that help residents to be sage in their

communities. Stephen Kane had been in post for the past 12 months working on this. Stephen Kane, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Specialist, outlined the work to ensure that colleagues and communities felt secure. Lunch and Learn sessions had been held, with the first being about autism awareness and the second on deaf awareness. The third session would be on black history awareness, and it was hoped that the programme would be maintained at a successful level. Not all could attend, and so attendance via Teams was being enabled for a future session. The Town Hall assessment audit showed that the building had positives, and work was being examined to seek improvements. The Council aimed to go above and beyond its equality duties, with a commitment from management that this would include the Amphora companies. The EDI working group had been reinstated and was meeting bi-monthly. EDI training and online learning was instrumental in improving knowledge. Different training types and styles were used and included modules on different protected characteristics.

The Panel was told that awareness was of critical importance regarding the different ways in which people lived their lives. More 'lunch and learn' sessions would be held, and monthly EDI updates circulated. The Local Government Association [LGA] and Equality Frameworks were described, in context of meeting the Council's equality duty, offering a peer challenge and using metrics and surveys to ascertain whether the majority of colleagues felt the council was inclusive.

Different equality measures which had been introduced were described. These included a trial provision of sanitary items, which had been a success, and the introduction of a gender-neutral bathroom. The Council was seeking to build an internal EDI website, enhanced policies and training, and introducing champions. The Race Charter was to be adopted and used to help remove unconscious biases. Ongoing work on improving accessibility would continue.

Mark Healy, Community & Partnerships Officer, described the work of the Partnership and Community Team to promote more compassionate communities, improve lifespans and enable conversations about difficult subjects such as loss and death. The City of Sanctuary project was described, creating a safe space for refugees, and work was ongoing towards becoming a dementia-friendly community. The Council was focussing on people, place, and policy, with audits including looking at work to create dementia-friendly environments. Examples of work with partners in communities were given, including with Stanway Together.

The Inclusion Charter was explained, with the Council's work towards instituting and expanding such a charter.

A Panel member asked why Colchester Borough Homes [CBH] required a separate policy on EDI. It was explained that CBH dealt with tenants, and it was thought that a dedicated policy was needed to cover this and improve ways to bring people together. A joint approach would, however, be taken by CBH and the Council together, working on the framework of policies. Councillors would be included in this work.

A Panel member who had attended the deaf awareness 'lunch and learn' session described the keenness of participants, and thanked officers for the work they had been carrying out to seek to make Council business accessible for those who

experienced deafness. The Panel member advocated greater inclusion of councillors in EDI work, improving councillors' awareness and understanding. The Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Specialist asked for views as to how officers could help facilitate councillor participation in EDI work, and what councillors would like to see happen. Richard Clifford, Democratic Services Manager, answered questions on making EDI training mandatory for councillors, to explain that this was already mandatory training. A Panel member requested that councillors be given the same training as officers, in group sessions, and suggested that there be a councillor appointed to be EDI Champion for the Council.

Another Panel member congratulated the presenting officers on the work focussing on dementia, and urged similar work to be done in regard to mental health issues and conditions such as AIDS, to improve affected residents' quality of life. The Panel member agreed that councillors could often find themselves forgotten about, and that they should be better included. Officers were asked to consider how the Council shared information and learning with other local authorities.

A Panel member stated that there had been much EDI training in the past, but less in recent times, with online training being tedious and scenario/dramatization style training being more effective.

The Panel discussed the accessibility challenges experienced by the deaf community and the mitigating measures which could help overcome these. The limitations of captioning were discussed, and members raised the Stagertext system, which was in use at the Mercury and which had been booked for the upcoming Full Council meeting.

The Panel discussed accessibility issues for Council buildings, and for parish councils and parish halls. Mandy Jones, Strategic Director, explained that the corporate landlord model would look at the strategic issues regarding accessibility, and that EDI would be put alongside other priorities and regulatory ambitions. People and partners would be advised of their responsibilities and roles in terms of community enabling. Enabling was a key approach for the Council to take.

*RESOLVED* that the Policy Panel commends the quality of the report.

*RECOMMENDED* to CABINET that: -

- a) The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion [EDI] Policy is worded to cover the entirety of the Council, and its subsidiaries and partners
- b) Cabinet encourage Group Leaders to work with the Member Development Group to ensure their Members are trained in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- c) Cabinet direct officers to review the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Training for Members from its current online form and explore other options included 'lived experience' training
- d) Cabinet explores the creation of an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Councillor Champion

e) The Council works with its system partners to share best practice on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training.

f) Cabinet direct the Monitoring Officer to remind Parish Councillors and their staff of their duties under EDI legislation.

**89 Work Programme 2023-24**

*RESOLVED* that the Panel approved its work programme for 2023-24, subject to the addition of an update on the drafting of a Sport and Leisure Strategy, to be presented at the Panel's meeting scheduled for 6 March 2024.