

## **STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 5 JANUARY 2010**

*Present :-* Councillor Christopher Arnold (Chairman)  
Councillors Nick Barlow, Mark Cory, Kim Naish,  
Laura Sykes, Nick Taylor, Dennis Willetts and  
Julie Young

*Substitute Members :-* Councillor Nick Cope for Councillor Mike Hogg  
Councillor Pauline Hazell  
for Councillor Jackie Maclean  
Councillor Margaret Kimberley  
for Councillor Gaye Pyman

### **42. Minutes**

RESOLVED that the minute of the meeting held on 9 December 2009 was confirmed as a correct record.

### **43. Items requested by members of the Panel and other Members**

The Chairman took the opportunity to explain to the panel members that the Group Spokespersons had used the previous day's briefing to discuss the remaining work programme for 2009-10.

Councillor Arnold said it had been agreed to have an extra meeting, to be held on 2 March 2010, to undertake a review of the Council's partners in Culture and Arts, namely Firstsite, The Mercury Theatre and Colchester Arts Centre, though this would be dependent on acceptance of invitations.

Councillor Arnold also explained that the panel would take the opportunity to invite Councillor Hume, Essex County Council Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transportation to the meeting of the 30 March 2010, to discuss with the panel the issue of parking restrictions at Mile End, the issue raised by Councillor Goss, and the issue of Town Centre traffic congestion raised by Councillor Naish.

In response to Councillor Cope, Councillor Arnold said the meeting with Councillor Hume would also be the appropriate time to raise what he considered to be another highway issue, that of inadequate gritting during the recent bouts of snowy weather and sub-zero temperatures.

### **44. Growth and future development options in Colchester**

**Councillor Cope (in respect of being the Chairman of the Local Development Framework Committee) and Councillor J Young (in respect of being a Member of Essex County Council) both declared a personal interest in the following item.**

Mr. Ian Vipond, Executive Director, and Mr. James Firth, Planning Policy Officer attended the meeting for this item.

Mr. Vipond addressed the panel, explaining that this review provided the panel with the opportunity to consider what has been happening to Colchester, what it means to residents of Colchester and whether it would hold residents to good advantage. Colchester was experiencing more housing development than almost any other district council in England in recent years, and the growth continues, relative to other district councils, despite the economic downturn. Mr. Vipond said a significant proportion of the local population growth was coming from within Colchester and was not due to migration, and the forecast showed further growth in the future, which raised the question of how do we provide the infrastructure and jobs to support this growing community.

Mr. James Firth presented the report on Growth and future development options in Colchester that provided an update on recent growth in Colchester and the progress with the Local Development Framework (LDF), where we are now, past trends and how we are moving forward.

Mr. Firth said Colchester was a Key Centre for Development and Change (KCDC) and a Haven Gateway Growth Point, with the current East of England Plan requiring 17,100 new homes between 2001 and 2021, representing 855 homes per annum, and 20,000 new jobs during the same period in the Essex Haven Gateway. Colchester's LDF sets out how Colchester will develop over the next 15 years and how growth will be delivered sustainably through an adopted Core Strategy.

Mr. Firth showed graphs illustrating the actual and forecasted new homes and new jobs growth in Colchester and moving forward, the type of work that is progressing, e.g. site allocations, development policies, supplementary planning documents and the delivery of the Core Strategy's Key facilities and Infrastructure.

Mr. Firth explained that the East of England Plan (RSS) is being reviewed to extend to 2031, and focuses on housing and jobs, using Government information on population growth, future house prices and the likely performance of the economy, using evidence from the National Housing and Planning Advice Unit and the Office of National Statistics. The RSS review considered four different approaches (scenarios), and comparative data was

presented to show the impact of each scenario on housing and job growth. Colchester responded to the review through consultation as approved by the LDF and ratified by Full Council, stating that subject to important caveats the maximum level of growth that Colchester can support is scenario 1, a roll forward of the existing plan. Mr. Firth concluded the presentation by explaining that the review of the RSS to 2031 will necessitate a future review of the core Strategy, to give the best options for accommodating growth sustainably, and that the Council's consultation response emphasised the importance of funding for regional, sub regional and local infrastructure.

In response to Councillor Cope, who commented that the Council in effect had to sign up to something and chose the option (scenario one) that necessitated the smallest volume of housing growth, Mr. Vipond said that the substantial amount of the future national housing growth would be in the south east of England and it would be difficult to argue for a lesser amount of growth target than had already happened. In terms of the economic argument Mr. Vipond said building a substantial high level of housing would be the only way to have a significant impact on the level of affordable housing needed to sustain this growth.

Mr. Vipond said Councillor Cope's comment that a condition should be introduced within the Core Strategy that would enable large developments to go ahead but with the proviso that Essex County Council ensured that adequate infrastructure is in place, for example highways, health, education and rail links, was well made. Mr. Vipond said there are different levels of infrastructure development and it would be expected that the national and regional agencies would lead on the supply of the necessary infrastructure growth. It was said that the process to ensure the correct provision of infrastructure is continually developing and improving, reflected in the Garrison regeneration area, now one third complete. North Colchester regeneration area had also benefitted from the new railway bridge and a northern approach road funded by the developers.

In response to Councillor Naish, Mr. Vipond said planning inspectors will impose the approval of planning applications on appeal unless they see a very good reason not to. Whilst it is recognised that Colchester will get significant growth to 2021, members must take an active role in the control of this development. It was better to plan for these eventualities than not to plan, that developers and inspectors will have greater support for applications given supplementary documents for additional facilities than if an application is given a blank refusal.

In response to Councillor Taylor, Mr. Firth said inevitably it was in the main larger towns that are designated key areas for development. Mr. Firth said statistics were showing that there is currently a correlation between housing

and jobs growth, and the Business Enterprise report on the RSS jobs target 2001 – 2021 supported the view that Colchester is likely to attain the overall jobs target by 2021. Mr. Vipond said there will always be the problem of purveying credibility in this process to areas where growth is envisaged. The processes with the regional development agencies have improved immeasurably, though there remains a risk of the economic downturn holding back the development industry. Whatever happens, it was imperative that where development continues community facilities and infrastructure are delivered at the right stage of each development.

In response to Councillor Arnold's question on local job pay, Mr. Firth said recent information suggested the average wage in Colchester was still below the Essex average. There was a need to look to provide a variety and range of jobs that increased the opportunities for all ends of the job market and pay scales, for example, education systems enabled an improvement in skills structure and consequently the range of jobs provided. In regards to what sectors the recent Colchester jobs had been created in, Mr. Vipond said he would ask the Business Enterprise Team to provide members with some information although longer term trends suggested sectors such as leisure, retail and public sector. Most of these jobs were local to Colchester and although there continues to be some commuting to London and elsewhere, these jobs brought income back into the Colchester economy.

Mr. Vipond responded to Councillor Naish in respect of the Mile End consultation on public playing fields and open space, by saying that any alternative use of this open space would only be for the development of a school, and if this was the outcome, the provision of additional nearby open space would be granted with the overall effect of there being no net loss.

*RESOLVED that the panel noted the update on the growth and future development options in Colchester and progress with Council's Local Development Framework.*

#### **45. Half yearly performance report including progress on the Strategic Plan Action Plan**

**Councillors J Young, Kimberley and Sykes (in respect of being Board Members of Colchester Borough Homes) all declared a personal interest in the following item.**

Councillor Dopson, Portfolio Holder for Performance and Partnerships, Ms. Lucie Breadman, Head of Corporate Management, and Mr. Greg Falvey, Chief Executive of Colchester Borough Homes attended the meeting for this item.

Ms. Breadman, attending her first scrutiny meeting, was introduced to the panel by Ms. Pam Donnelly, Executive Director.

Councillor Dopson and Ms. Breadman introduced the Half Yearly Performance Report and responded to questions from the panel.

In response to Councillor Arnold enquiring about the progress with the Performance and Reward Scheme, Ms. Breadman said that since writing the report the Trade Union have now balloted their members on whether to accept the scheme or not and the result is that members decided to reject the reward scheme as proposed. On the basis that there is no collective agreement with the trade union the Senior Management Team has decided not to pursue further the reward element.

It was also noted that forming this conclusion took into account the fact that the economy has changed significantly since the start of the negotiations and introducing a reward scheme now when the Council is facing financial pressures could send the wrong message. There is however a strong commitment to the performance management element of the scheme which will continue and SMT will be investigating any other, non-financial opportunities to reward those staff who perform exceptionally well.

Later in the discussions, Ms. Breadman gave some detail to Councillor Taylor about 'Learning Pool' which is a new addition to our learning and development approach. Ms. Breadman said that the council offers a range of different learning and development styles and Learning Pool adds to these by providing access to a range of 'e-learning' opportunities which can be more accessible and flexible for some. More traditional methods will continue to be provided, where required and while initial feedback has been positive, more evaluation will take place once the programme has been in place for a longer period.

Mr. Falvey joined the discussions to explain to members the reasons for the national indicator for the average time to relet Council houses showing red, with the current average time being 36 days against a target of 28 days.

Mr. Falvey explained that the indicator is made up of three elements, General Needs stock voids, Sheltered Accommodation voids and Temporary Accommodation voids, and it was the last two of these void types that create the major problems. The vast majority of voids, those of General Needs Accommodation had an average time to relet of 30 days, a respectable figure, though it was intended to reduce this to 20 days, whilst the Sheltered and Temporary Accommodation voids average relet time of 40 days or more was attributable in the main to shared facilities for which a planned investment and remodelling programme was needed. Mr. Falvey said the Temporary

Accommodation Stock was transferred in December to a Housing Association on a long lease agreement, and this would have a significant long term impact on the relet times. Mr. Falvey confirmed that the target for this year would not be reached, but was confident a respectable 32 day figure would be achieved.

Panel members and officers agreed with Councillor Arnold, that it would be helpful and informative to include in future reporting, the aggregate relet time figure with a breakdown by the three void types to explain what was happening.

In response to Councillor Young who supported investment by the Council to bring all Sheltered Accommodation up to the required standard, Mr. Falvey explained that the Council, as part of the Asset Management Strategy are reviewing the worst properties that fall into the Sheltered Accommodation category, that will inform which of these are the key properties we should be investing in for improvement.

The panel agreed with Councillor Arnold that the final strategy report and Mr. Falvey's report on recommendations to improve voids performance should be reported to the panel at the earliest convenient meeting in 2010-11.

*RESOLVED that:-*

- i) The panel considered and noted the Half Yearly Performance Report including progress on the Strategic Plan Action Plan.*
  
- ii) The panel proposed that Cabinet consider showing the three separate elements of the ex-212 Average time to relet council houses indicator in future performance reports, which will assist with future analysis of performance.*
  
- iii) The panel proposed that they continue their scrutiny of the Average Relet Time performance in May or June by reviewing the outcomes of the Sheltered Housing Accommodation review currently being undertaken by the Council as part of the Asset Management Strategy, when it is finalised, along with the VOIDS performance report and recommendations drawn up by CBH.*

#### **46. Comprehensive Area Assessment (One Place)**

**Councillor J Young (in respect of being a Member of Essex County Council) declared a personal interest in the following item.**

Mr. Adrian Pritchard, Chief Executive Officer and Councillor Dopson, Portfolio Holder for Performance and partnerships attended the meeting for this item and Mr. Pritchard presented the report on Comprehensive Area Assessment (One Place), known as CAA.

Mr. Pritchard explained that this reporting format was a replacement for the original Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) format, in which Colchester had been assessed as a borough council as 'excellent'. Under CAA the assessment was made in all public sector working across the whole of Essex. Mr. Pritchard said whilst the report mentions Colchester in a number of places, the report or findings are not directed specifically at Colchester.

The report gave a green flag for the response by Essex to the recession, though it was acknowledged that Colchester had been very proactive in its work and Mr. Pritchard felt Colchester should take some credit for the work and effort made by members and officers to local businesses and communities.

The report gave a red flag for Safeguarding Essex Children. Mr. Pritchard acknowledged that as part of public sector working the Council had a responsibility and role to play in safeguarding local vulnerable children and a part time person is employed for this work in the Council, though a budget bid will be made to increase this staffing resource. Mr. Pritchard said the Council do take this concern seriously, are confident we have identified the work needed and are fully committed to this work.

In response to Councillor Barlow, Councillor Dopson said she personally felt the 'red flag' was concerning and had to be addressed, with a need to be proactive, more than just a duty to cooperate. The Council was to ensure, supported by a financial commitment, that CBC employees and partner organisations, have a 'heightened awareness' of the responsibility of safeguarding children. Colchester is sadly, though necessarily, one of the first areas in the county to receive the support of a multi-agency allocation group, which would enable more detailed tracking of children's services throughout the borough - and the Council had a part to play in this work, though partnership working is essential to be successful in our aims.

Mr. Pritchard said that just as the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership was a partnership issue and not just a police issue, so was the case with Safeguarding Essex Children, with all public sector organisations and individuals having a role to play.

In response to Councillor Naish who took umbrage at the 'our world' being one of the Priorities for Essex, saying a more appropriate priority would be 'our County', given that local communities could not change what is done nationally or across the world, Councillor Dopson said these priorities had been made and agreed by Essex County Councillors. Whilst Councillor Dopson accepted 'Our World' appeared grandiose it was underpinned as 'global citizens' who all had a responsibility and a duty to the world.

Mr. Pritchard concluded the discussions by saying the Council should take some significant pride in the report, that Colchester has proven to be a district council that takes a lead on many initiatives, and encouragingly, partners look to Colchester for guidance, help and support.

*RESOLVED* that the panel commented and noted the Area Assessment report from the One Place judgement.

#### **47. Review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Performance and Partnerships**

Councillor Dopson, Portfolio Holder for Performance and Partnerships attended the meeting for this item. This was a short item, given Councillor Dopson had already discussed issues and responsibilities with the panel during the previous two items.

Councillor Dopson, in response to Councillor Naish, said that the sale of tobacco and alcohol to those under the legal age was a licensing issue, dealt with by Trading Standards and license enforcement. That said punitive measures are not enough, and there was also a duty on the Council as a partner to the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership to play an active role in working with schools and health services in addressing these issues.

In terms of partnership working, and in response to Councillor Naish, Councillor Dopson said she had been proactive in integrating the 'Older Persons Forum', that provided to residents a similar voice given to the 'Young People Forum'. The forums are well attended, with twenty five local agencies attending meetings in 2009. The forums consider the issues for older people, which are recognised as transportation in rural areas, isolation, inactivity and a lack of stimulation.

Councillor Dopson was proud of her involvement with Colchester's Children and Young People Strategic Partnership (CYPSP), now the North East Essex Children's Trust Board, and was passionate about the delivery of the respective Service Level Agreements (SLAs). Councillor Dopson said she



also has regular one to one meetings with the Chairman of the Primary Care Trust. Councillor Dopson concluded by also confirming her involvement in regular report monitoring and meetings with partner organisations funded through SLAs and Public Sector organisations through the Public Sector Partnership (PSP), part of Colchester2020.

*RESOLVED* that the panel thanked Councillor Dopson for attending the meeting and responding to member's questions.