

# Policy and Public Initiatives Panel

Wednesday, 25 September 2019

**Attendees:** Councillor Christopher Arnold, Councillor Helen Chuah, Councillor Phil Coleman, Councillor John Jowers, Councillor Derek Loveland, Councillor Lee Scordis, Councillor Martyn Warnes

**Apologies:**

**Substitutes:**

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In response to questions, Owen Howell, Democratic Services Officer, confirmed that he would ask Rachel Forkin, Transport and Sustainability Manager, as to whether a letter had been sent by Cabinet to Councillor Kevin Bentley, Essex County Council Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure, as recommended by the Panel in minute 36 of the previous meeting.

*RESOLVED* that the minutes of the meeting held on 31 July 2019 be confirmed as a correct record.

## 40 Public Engagement – Survey Results and Contributions at the meeting

Councillor Mark Cory, Leader of the Council, summarised the purpose of the Panel, to raise and consider ideas from the public, to look at feasibility and identify ways to take these forward. He confirmed that work was already underway to follow up on ideas for use of the River Colne which had been brought forward at the Panel's previous meeting.

Mr Alan Skinner, trustee of the 'Learning Never Stops' adult learning charity, addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1). He called for an adult learning centre to be provided and made available for use by all in the Borough. He detailed the long history of adult learning in Colchester and, whilst he believed that a new adult college would not be feasible, other options such as the setting up of a 'learning shop' were possible.

Mr Skinner informed the Panel that his charity's website had around 15,000 users who used it to source courses and learning providers. If a learning centre were to be set up in the town, it would be vital that this be advertised and promoted across a range of media, and by different organisations, including the Council.

The Panel discussed previous centres which had provided such facilities, such as the old learning centre and the old Greyfriars Adult Education Centre. Mr Skinner explained that the assets of the old Greyfriars centre had been transferred to the Wilson Marriage Centre which remained in operation. Unlike the locally-managed Greyfriars, the Wilson Marriage Centre was used to provide services and courses run and managed by Essex County Council.

Mr Tony Barker addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) and urged that work be done by the Council to ensure that improvements are made to the appearance of the derelict land to the West and South-West of FirstSite. The poor appearance of the land detracted from the ability of FirstSite to attract visitors. The Council were asked to consider actions to improve the appearance of other sites, such as the former 'Jacks' store, and to take action to force private property owners to improve dilapidated properties.

The Chair highlighted the ongoing work to bring the 'Jacks' site back into use, as part of the adjacent 'Three Wise Monkeys', and the time being taken over this, due to the discovery of the remains of a Roman Bath under the property.

Ms. Ali Wilkin addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) to request that the Council seek to tackle poverty through the provision of additional allotments. The Council was asked to find land for use as allotments by those in the most deprived communities, potentially in partnership with charities such as Colchester Food Bank. Ms. Wilkin explained how such partnerships were already used in other areas, describing the initiative in place in Selby, where local food banks and churches worked together to run allotments, in an effort to address food poverty and heal divisions in communities.

Mr. Joe Wilkin addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1). and to raise the poor state of pavements and kerbs throughout the town, in particular those in the area around the St. Botolph's roundabout, and to request that the Council communicate his concerns to Essex County Council, who were responsible for maintenance. Mr Wilkin explained that he provided care for his mother, who often used a wheelchair, and that the broken pavements caused her significant pain and discomfort whether walking or using a wheelchair. The pavements along the North end of Mersea Road and those outside the Magistrates' Court were also noted as being in particularly poor condition. Mr Wilkin requested that full and proper repairs be carried out, rather than broken paving being replaced with cheaper asphalt, as this caused difficulties for residents with limited mobility.

Councillor Scordis, as County Councillor for Abbey Division, asked Mr. Wilkin to contact him to discuss this issue. He explained that he had raised many pavement defects with the County Council, including those around St. Botolph's and the Court, and that he would raise the ongoing problems with Councillor Kevin Bentley, County Council Cabinet Member for Infrastructure. Austerity was suggested as a cause of reduced funding for maintenance of pavements, and the replacement of old paving slabs and asphalt with modern concrete slabs was raised as a potential solution. The Panel affirmed that the Council and Cabinet should keep pressure on Essex County Council to address damaged or dangerous pavements in the St Botolph's area.

Mr. Stuart Johnson addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1). He requested that the Council install on-street 'bike hangars' for cycle storage, especially where this is not available in properties, such as flats. This more-frequently affects those on lower incomes and detracts from efforts to encourage cycling. Mr Johnson listed a number of places where hangars are used and named the company Cyclehoop as a provider. There are now around 1,800

hangers in operation within London boroughs, giving space for 8,000 bikes. Bristol, Salford and Edinburgh have also installed such hangers. Mr. Johnson urged the Council to make secure storage available to all residents.

The Chair notified those present that safer cycle storage was on the Panel's agenda for its meeting on 15 January 2020. The Panel agreed that lack of storage could be a factor inhibiting modal shift. Questions were asked as to whether developers could be made to provide cycle storage as a condition for obtaining planning permission.

Mr. Johnson explained that provision would need to be led by demand, as it had been in London, requiring residents to state that they required the storage, and that there were options around charging for use of the storage, so that users contributed towards the cost of maintenance. It was agreed that efforts to install such storage would need to be community-led.

Mr. Michael Batten addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) and to present the two submissions which he had made to the online survey. He welcomed efforts to improve the appearance of Colchester town centre, including new flower displays, Town Ambassadors and the removal of A-boards. There remained two items of unsightly street clutter, in the form of temporary County Council signs sited near the bus lane on Queen Street. These were now rusting, fell over, and led to broken sandbags. These were to have been removed once permanent signs were in place, but this removal had not occurred. It was requested that the Council raise this with the County Council.

Members of the Panel committed to pursue removal of these signs and indicated that they would raise this with the County Council's Cabinet Member for Infrastructure. A member of the Panel explained that the County Council had installed the bus lane to mitigate the poor air quality recorded in Queen Street and St Botolph's Street. It was asked why private traffic was still allowed to turn into Queen Street from East Hill and suggested that further measures be used to prevent U-turns on East Hill by traffic travelling from the High Street and wishing to turn into Queen Street. It was stressed that action taken should aim to avoid moving the issue of U-turns further down East Hill, and specifically to the junction with Roman Road.

Councillor Mike Lilley, Portfolio Holder for Communities, Wellbeing and Public Safety assured the Panel that he had written to the County Council's Cabinet Member for Infrastructure to request that the temporary signs be removed, or face action by the Borough Council. He had been told that they would remain in place until an issue of uncertainty regarding the permanent signs was resolved. The Council continued to pursue a resolution to this issue with Essex County Council.

Speaking on the issue of dangerous cycling on footways, Mr. Batten requested that enforcement action be taken against cycling on footways. He described seeing enforcement opportunities not being taken and stressed the dangers posed by pavement cycling, especially in busy places and at busy times of day.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities, Wellbeing and Public Safety agreed with the importance of enforcement and informed the Panel that he had directed Neighbourhood Team officers to take action to reduce cycling on footways.

Councillor Mark Goacher attended and with the consent of the Chair addressed the Panel to request that Holy Trinity Church on Trinity Street be brought back into use. This church had previously been leased by the Council for use as a café by GO4, a charity supporting people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and as an indoor market, but this had closed in 2017. The Saxon Church was possibly the oldest existent church in Colchester and the charity had asked if it could be brought back into use as a charity café and drop-in centre for those residents who experience isolation, and for groups providing social opportunities for the elderly.

Councillor Goacher posited that the lack of heating would not be a problem during the Summer, and viability of the potential use could be strengthened if the building were managed by the Council as a shared space for community groups. Should the Council install modern heating, this could then be used all year round. A member of the Panel voiced agreement with this proposal, had spoken recently to the relevant portfolio holder regarding the Church, and believed it should be opened for use. It could potentially be used as the site of an indoor market, for education or to support groups tackling loneliness, as well as offering a visitor centre.

The Panel discussed past uses of the Church, including work put into finding potential uses for it. Now that several facilities serving elderly residents in the Borough had been closed, namely the Lion Walk Centre and the Abbots Centre, it was suggested that Holy Trinity Church could be brought back into use for sustainable, practical purposes which would help to improve facilities available to older residents of the Borough. It was further suggested that the Essex Heritage Fund may be a possible source of funding to assist with this.

The Leader of the Council informed the meeting that he had initiated action to find a partner organisation to make use of the Church for a community purpose around 18 months ago, with serious proposals from the Greek Orthodox Church and from MIND resulting in a decision to proceed with MIND, in light of their success with a similar project elsewhere. MIND had subsequently pulled out of the project, but the Council remained committed to finding a use for the building which combined community benefits with sustainability. Officers were working with Historic England to win funding for the building, but it was noted that there was a limit to the commercial possibilities for the Church due to the Diocese having a covenant on the site.

The Leader agreed that the heating system would need a full refurbishment and explained that his aim was to include the Church in the Town Centre Master Plan, as it was one of the major historic foci in the Town Centre.

Mr. Dorian Kelly addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) to suggest that the Council pursue ways to promote the stopping of tour buses within Colchester. He detailed conversations he had held with tour companies, who told him that they want Colchester to be a destination for their buses/coaches but were currently hindered by the lack of stopping and layover places, and tight restrictions on pick-ups at the West end of East Hill. Mr Kelly suggested that the bus depot on Queen Street could be used, with adaptations, as a stopping and layover point, incorporating tourist and toilet facilities.

A member of the Panel gave support to the benefits to be gained from providing a base for tour buses to use. The Panel questioned whether the bus depot site had greater potential for other uses, such as for a covered market, and discussed the need to examine where other towns sited bus and coach facilities. The Portfolio Holder for Communities, Wellbeing and Public Safety clarified that tour buses and coaches currently parked on Sheepen Road, and that the use of Cowdray Crescent for dropping off and picking up had stopped due to the tailbacks that this caused on the High Street. It was noted that evidence was needed as to the scale of problems facing tour bus operators, and to ascertain what knowledge they had of existing options for stopping and lay-overs. The Leader of the Council agreed to explore options for providing better facilities for tour buses to visit Colchester.

Following the public contributions, the Chair explained the process which had been used for gathering input from the public engagement exercise and how the Panel would discuss and decide what recommendations they may wish to put forward for Cabinet to approve the Panel to add to their work programme.

The Chair invited the Leader of the Council to brief the Panel on progress made on both the emerging Transport Strategy, and the Town Centre Master Plan, where this related to suggested initiatives concerning the Town Centre/High Street or the Transport Strategy. The Leader did so, explaining that the Council was working closely with the County Council on the Transport Strategy, and that the determining of the future of the town centre was of critical importance to the Strategy. The Town Centre Master Plan was focussing on matters such as investment in historic buildings, potential for pedestrianisation and how transport would fit in with this.

The Leader of the Council proposed to bring a blueprint of the Town Centre Master Plan to the Panel meeting on 15 January 2020 to brief on what was proposed, within the wider development and transport plans for the Borough. Colchester was progressing relatively quickly with this, having succeeded in the first stage of bidding for funding from central government's 'Future High Streets' programme.

The Panel noted that, for the initiatives relating to the High Street and its environs, it would be best to examine these as part of the already-scheduled item on the High Street, following the briefing it would receive on the blueprint for the Town Centre Master Plan and elements of the Transport Strategy. The importance of ensuring that any development in the St. Botolph's area fitted and augmented the Council's plans for the High Street was stressed, and that these areas of planning should be considered in relation to each other. The Leader of the Council committed to provide additional information on this subject at that meeting and gave assurances that the Cabinet continued to work with the County Council to find a satisfactory plan for the St Botolph's roundabout area. It was also agreed that the consideration of secure suburban cycle hangers be held alongside the scheduled consideration of cycle storage in the centre of Colchester, also due to be held on 15 January 2020.

Where initiatives fell within the remit of Essex County Council, it was confirmed that these could be forwarded to the County Council, should the Panel decide that this would be appropriate.

The Panel observed that any plans to reduce traffic on the High Street would need to

consider how this would affect residents of the Dutch Quarter and businesses which depended on access via the High Street and West Stockwell Street. This included the Town Hall itself, with its parking accessed in this way. One member suggested consideration of reducing the one-way section of West Stockwell Street to the South end of the road. This would prevent vehicles entering the High Street but would give better access to parking without vehicles being forced to drive down the High Street.

Certain initiatives involved the provision of services or facilities which had been provided in the past and it was stated that information would need to be sought from officers as to why the provision had ended, should the Panel decide to recommend that they be further examined.

The request for the Council to provide facilities for padel tennis and table tennis were discussed. One member opined that installing permanent fixed table tennis tables would be the easier and more popular option, potentially in a Castle Park location. The member further requested that benches for chess-playing be installed also. The concern was raised that padel tennis was currently not a well-known sport and that interest in using a court would be limited. The Leader of the Council voiced his support for the provision of table tennis tables as part of the Council's work to promote participation in sport in partnership with other councils. A member of the Panel queried whether padel tennis could be provided at the new sports hall which was being built as part of the Northern Gateway development. The Chair offered to discuss the potential for this with the lead officer on the construction project.

Regarding the request that a mosque be provided for the Borough, the Panel noted that a mosque was already located and in use in the Town, sited in Priory Street.

The potential for a tram system was considered and members recalled that the potential for resuming the use of trams, or an alternative such as a hopper or 'nippy' bus service, had been examined a number of years ago, as a part of a possible future pedestrianised town centre. It was noted that plans for a new rapid transit system, tied in to the garden communities project envisioned in the Emerging Local Plan, was already being considered. The Leader of the Council explained that the Cabinet was examining ways to best use funds which had been gained from successful Housing Infrastructure Fund bids, and this included the part-funding of a rapid transit system. A Panel member queried whether Colchester could support a tram system and suggested a hopper bus service to operate in the centre of town.

In regard to suggestions for improving air quality, reducing traffic in the town centre and increasing greenery, a member suggested that the planting of additional trees in the town centre would improve the atmosphere and the look of the centre. This could be accompanied by better street furniture, such as benches. The suburbs of Colchester were acknowledged as being relatively green, but this could not currently be said to be true of the Town's centre. The Leader of the Council informed the Panel that the Council was aiming to plant at least 200,000 new trees, primarily on Council-owned land. Opportunities for this in the Town centre were limited, however, due to the private ownership of some potential sites, and the concrete over others. The green wall initiative on North Hill was still progressing.

Following up the initiative brought to the meeting by Ms Ali Wilkin, the Panel queried

whether the Council could sanction appropriate community groups to run additional allotment sites. It was remarked that the Council controlled many allotments already, with the figure confirmed to be 1,100 allotments across 19 sites. 40-50 allotments had been supported by the use of the County Council's Community Initiative Fund. Allotments were popular both in urban and rural areas. The Panel enquired as to whether it would be possible to require developers to provide allotments as part of development schemes and whether the Council could site more allotment sites on its land. The Leader of the Council noted the success of the 'Big Garden' in Highwoods, and the Council's policy to open community orchards but emphasised that the Council, where possible, prioritised the use of its available urban land for affordable and social housing, addressing the demand for this. In addition, the Council operated a £900k Council Tax support scheme for those in greatest need.

The suggestion that efforts be made to encourage development of a new 'lanes' area for smaller independent retailers was examined. Colchester currently has such an area, along Eld Lane, Trinity Street and Sir Isaac's Walk [the 'South Lanes' area]. A member gave the view that to be successful, the Council would need control over business rates and that this would be a positive area for action, should this be devolved to local authorities. The Leader of the Council extolled progress made in the project to revitalise the South Lanes, with support from the Council. Funding and assistance with communications and public relations had been given by the Council, and the Colchester Business Improvement District was an active partner in this work.

The Panel examined the request that the Council tidy derelict land owned by the Council to the South East of FirstSite. A member of the Panel voiced agreement that the site looked untidy and detracted from FirstSite and suggested that officers investigate what measures could be taken in the short term to improve the look of the land. The Leader of the Council informed the Panel that options had been examined, including sturdy hoardings around the site. This would cost £20,000 and it had been decided that this was too costly for a short-term temporary measure. The Leader gave assurance that less-costly alternatives would be investigated and committed to re-examine what could be done to tidy and clear the site.

Speaking on general suggestions which called for increased efforts to promote cleanliness in the Town's centre, the Leader of the Council gave assurance that this was a priority and that 42 new recycling bins had already been installed in the town centre, with special receptacles for chewing gum. He committed to continue the Council's work to minimise the culture of littering, where this still remained an issue.

A Panel member requested that, as part of its future work item looking at the High Street, it examined the issue of toilet provision for the night-time economy. The High Street urinal which had been provided for evening and night users of the Town, and which descended into the street during the daytime, was discussed. This had ceased to be used once a restaurant outlet had commenced trading in an adjacent unit. Night-time urination in doorways and on walls was both unpleasant and potentially damaging to buildings. It was stressed that options should be sought for all genders.

The Panel discussed the feasibility of the Council providing a pop-up stage in the Town centre, for hire by performers and musicians, such as the one provided by York Council in Parliament Street. The Leader of the Council voiced his wish to see more

live music and performance art in the Town centre.

The Leader of the Council briefed the Panel on the options considered for an indoor market, and the recent Portfolio Holder decision to give greater flexibility and new options for the provision of the current market, including different locations and market days, and ways to reduce the time commitment for Neighbourhood Officers who assisted with set up and removal. The potential for a market in the Queen Street bus depot building was covered, and the Leader cautioned that this was an interesting idea, but great care had to be taken with the building as it was in poor condition and there was potential for the façade to collapse should major changes be made to the building. Nevertheless, dependent on the resolution of the current planning appeal relating to the Alumno plans for the 'Cultural Quarter', this could be a positive use for the building. A Panel member requested that discussion of market locations should not include the Vineyard Gate area, due to low footfall in that area, and loss of parking spaces which a market would cause, including disabled parking.

Concern was raised that the majority of initiatives being discussed were focussed on Colchester itself, and that consideration should be given to other parts of the Borough, especially as populations rose and infrastructure requirements increased.

Ways to provide a learning centre or 'shop' were raised. The Leader of the Council explained that the County Council continued to seek additional ways in which to use existing libraries, and with space in Colchester Library still under-utilised, this could potentially be a location in which an adult learning centre could be based.

The Panel considered ways to improve the reach and visibility of public engagement exercises. It was recommended that councillors be asked to use their contacts with residents to publicise opportunities for them to speak on what they would wish to see done in their local areas. It was hoped that this would encourage more input from those living in the rural parts of the Borough. Parish Councils could likewise be asked to publicise such an engagement exercise, and it was suggested that different meeting venues might be considered, to widen the Panel's reach.

*RESOLVED* that: -

(a) The Policy and Public Initiatives Panel has considered the initiatives and issues raised as part of its public consultation and that those relating to the town centre be further considered as part of the scheduled future work item relating to options for Colchester High Street.

(b) The Policy and Public Initiatives Panel consider the use of secure cycle hangers as part of its scheduled future work item for wider consideration of secure cycle storage.

*RECOMMENDED* to CABINET that approval be given for the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel to examine potential options for providing or supporting the provision of a new lifelong learning centre in the Borough of Colchester.

## **41 Work Programme 2019-20**

The Panel considered the draft Work Programme for 2019-20. The Chair informed the



Panel that he would invite the Chief Executive of the Barking Youth Zone to address their meeting on 27 November.

A request was made that the Colchester BID be invited to provide an update on the South Lanes Project on 15 January 2020, to be given when the Panel considers options for the High Street and Town centre.

The Panel directed that an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats be provided as part of the consideration of the two forms of local authority administration, to be considered at the Panel's meeting on 4 March 2020.

*RESOLVED* that the Work Programme for 2019 be noted.