

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

6 JANUARY 2009

Present :- Councillor Christopher Arnold (Chairman)
Councillors Nick Barlow, Mark Cory, Pauline Hazell,
Peter Higgins, Margaret Kimberley, Kim Naish,
Gaye Pyman, Nick Taylor and Julie Young

Substitute Member :- Councillor Mike Gamble for Councillor Mike Hogg

30. Minutes

The minute of the meeting held on 16 December will be confirmed at the next meeting.

31. Work Programme

The Chairman explained that the outstanding item on Going for Growth, postponed in the autumn, would be pursued, hopefully to be reviewed before the end of the Municipal year. Following on from the December meeting, the Chairman said the 2009-10 Budget Strategy would now go to the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel on the 20th January as originally planned, and an additional meeting for this to be scrutinised together with the Strategic Plan, and provisionally set for the 27 January, was now cancelled.

RESOLVED that the panel;

- i) Noted the 2008-09 rolling Work Programme
- ii) Agreed that an invitation should go from the panel to the Essex County Council Portfolio Holder for Adults, Health and Community Well Being, to attend a meeting in conjunction with the Council motion about the Greenways Care Home.

32. The Strategic Plan 2009-2012

Councillor Dopson, Portfolio Holder for Performance and Partnerships, supported by Mr. John Gilbert, Interim Head of Resource Management, introduced the new draft of the Strategic Plan 2009-2012.

Councillor Dopson said the new Strategic Plan has developed over recent months, with a deliberate shift to a short document, that lists the three main objectives, all underpinned by the nine priority areas to improve the quality of life for local people.

Mr. Gilbert said the document had deliberately been kept short, for ease of reading, and further detail will be in the accompanying action plans for each priority that will set out the intended outcomes, align actions to the budget, and demonstrate linkages to the Local Area Agreement and National Indicators. Mr. Gilbert explained the reasoning

behind the consultation work undertaken during the creation process, and that highlighted resident's views, which were reflected in national trends.

Noting the brevity in the research data on older people by comparison with young people, Councillor Dopson said current government demographic data gives priority to younger people, and is reflected in the high priority for younger people by Essex County Council, though this will not change Colchester's priority links to services provided to the elderly and vulnerable, and the need in this current climate and an ageing population, to address issues around welfare rights and poverty.

Councillor Kimberley said the document was very general, with little detail and did not provide sufficient information for members to comment upon. Councillor Kimberley questioned the factualness of the comment that "we will improve the health of the public", with a more realistic, less ambitious aspiration being "to work towards improving the health of the public". Councillor Kimberley concluded by suggesting the comment that the Strategic Plan needed to be flexible was a get out clause, in that no-one knew what the future holds.

Councillor Dopson, in response to a 'flexible Strategic Plan', said this did not suggest there was no commitment, but that the nine priorities areas will remain a commitment, though the outcomes on delivery may differ, according to funding.

In response to Councillor Young, Councillor Dopson said the Council would need to look at innovative ways of providing the same services within the current budget restraints e.g. 'care villages' to help the elderly and vulnerable.

In response to Councillor Barlow, Councillor Dopson and Mr. Gilbert confirmed that a range of other local authority strategic plans were looked at. It was thought the new format would be more accessible to local people than that of a document the size of previous year's plans. Mr. Gilbert said organisations have a cycle 'slimming down' the size of documents over time as their understanding improves, while continuing to have explicit links into budget priorities and seeking for alignment with the local area agreement and national indicators, where appropriate.

Councillor Taylor questioned whether plan objectives reflected the needs of local people or those of our partners and questioned whether people's priorities did not change significantly. In response, Mr. Gilbert said analysis by Ipsos MORI revealed that people's priorities were relatively stable over periods of time and therefore it was appropriate to use the wide-scale consultation data drawn from the 2006/2007 BVPI survey, augmented by specific focused consultations. These showed that, for example, traffic issues such as congestion remained significant for people, even with the current economic downturn, partly because a lot of the issues were by their nature long term. Councillor Dopson said the impetus of the new plan was definitely for local people, to some extent, generic to the area, and linked through the Local Area Agreement and National Indicators to improved performance. Councillor Dopson confirmed that the Local Strategic Partnership was currently reviewing their arrangements in consultation with all partners, and a new community strategy document was expected shortly.

Councillor Gamble commented that the plan and the report was easy to understand as it was a simple report put simply, without being simplistic and he commended those involved in their preparation and presentation.

Councillor Arnold said that if the word 'Colchester' was taken out of the plan, the plan would work for almost every other authority in England, so how did the plan set Colchester apart from other local authorities? In response, Councillor Dopson said what sets us apart through the plan, is the focus on local people and the enabling of residents to get on with their lives, supported by their local Council to provide the services they need, which was different to previous years and the aspiration to make Colchester a strategic centre of excellence.

Councillor Hazell whilst commenting that the plan lacked substance, with a lot of promises with little substance and felt like a recipe for a clone town, but she as trusted that it would be fleshed out through the accompanying action plan. Councillor Kimberley commented that the use of "We will ..." in the priorities was an aspiration but she had no idea whether they could be delivered in the current economic environment. Councillor Dopson said the detail would be forthcoming.

Councillor Arnold suggested that the plan document should show the period over which it was intended to operate and, with agreement from Councillor Dopson, Mr. Gilbert confirmed that the document would be dated in the version to go to Cabinet.

RESOLVED that the panel considered and noted the proposed new Strategic Plan 2009-2012.

33. National Indicators - Interim Review

Councillor Arnold explained to the panel that at the previous day's briefing, it was confirmed that the report on National Indicators being reported to the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel was a one-off review, that was a strategic overview of the new performance framework, and that all future reports dealing with the detail of the results would be presented regularly to the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel.

Mr. John Gilbert introduced the report on National Indicators, a new performance framework replacing the old Best Value performance Indicators (BVPI). Mr. Gilbert said it was not the intention to scrutinise the detail, but welcomed comments on the formal delivery and commentary. Mr. Gilbert explained this was a transitional year, hence no centrally set targets, though some targets for indicators that were existing Local Area Agreement commitments or existing BVPI target are included.

In response to Councillor Barlow, Mr. Gilbert said there was no historical detail (e.g. previous year's results) for benchmarking purposes, to include for the new indicators, but where a direct comparison could be made, previous years results could be included.

In response to Councillor Young, Mr. Adrian Pritchard, Chief Executive, addressed the panel explaining the Colchester's last CPA assessment rating was 'excellent'. Mr.

Pritchard said the new CAA assessment will not provide an individual local authority rating, that their will be a countywide assessment made of all public sector organisations to determine the effectiveness of these partnerships in working, and these findings will be reflected in this Council's direction of Travel' and 'Use of Resources' within the Annual Audit Inspection Letter reported annually to the Accounts and Regulatory Committee.

In response to Councillors Arnold and Cory, Councillor Dopson said the suggestion that the monitoring results of National Indicator that fall within a portfolio, should be presented to the panel at the time of the review of the Portfolio Holder was a good idea, something Councillor Taylor confirmed had been common practice in previous administrations.

Mr. Gilbert said the results of staff sickness absence continued to monitored, but was not a National Indicator. Mr. Gilbert explained that the Council's Performance Dashboard was split into four quadrants, Organisation (National Indicators), Customer Services, People and Resources (Finance). Staff sickness absence remained a local indicator, reported as part of all the Human Resources local indicators within the People quadrant. Mr. Gilbert confirmed to Councillor Taylor that it would be possible to report Staff Sickness Absence as part of the future National Indicators report.

RESOLVED that the panel;

- i) Considered and noted the interim review of the new National Indicators introduced on 1 April 2008.
- ii) Requested that all future monitoring reports to be reported to the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel should include the local indicator results for Staff Sickness Absence.
- iii) Requested at the time of the review of each Portfolio Holder, for the report to be accompanied by the current results for the national indicators that fall within the responsibilities of the portfolio.
- iv) Requested data from previous years results, once available, to be added to the National Indicator monitoring report for comparison purposes.

34. Review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Business

Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Business, before summarising the work within his portfolio, thanked officers for the help and cooperation during his term as the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Business.

Councillor Smith said the Concessionary Fare Scheme was now extended, to run between 9.00 am and 12.00 midnight, with the highest take-up of any local authority in Essex, that would help the elderly and contribute to an easing in traffic congestion. This contract had also been renegotiated by officers resulting in a £400,000 saving to the Council, a positive achievement. Councillor Smith commended Mr. Adrian

Pritchard, Chief Executive, for bringing together all the Essex authorities to discuss and iron out the problems that had previously been experienced with the scheme.

Councillor Smith spoke of the effects of the economic downturn and the Council's revenues, with a dramatic fall in planning applications and Council House sales, a negative effect on Business Rate collection rates and a dramatic increase in all types of Benefit applications, with the Benefits service struggling with the new demands and unlikely to meet their annual targets.

The purchase of Rowan House has proved a success with the Council reaping an annual saving of £50,000 as a result of this business. Councillor Smith also mentioned the Council's insurances had been renegotiated, with improved coverage, and a saving of £120,000 per annum.

Councillor Smith was pleased to announce a dramatic decrease in the level of staff sickness absence in the authority. Ms. Pam Donnelly, Executive Director said the Council had introduced a plan of action to address the issue of sickness absence, with greater support to line managers, development of skills and techniques to deal with sickness absence, appropriate advice and counselling to staff through the Council's Wellbeing Policy and an active follow through of procedures and firm action.

In response to Councillor Young, Councillor Smith said he did not know the retail outlets that would fill large empty stores such as Woolworths. In response to Councillor Naish, it was confirmed that the drop in car parking income was more the result of the delay in the implementation of the 2008-09 charges, rather than a downturn in the number of cars visiting the town centre.

In response to Councillor Arnold about what the Council was doing to improve car parking queues at multi-storey car parks, Councillor Smith confirmed that queue management within the town centre had reduced queuing at the multi-storey car parks, though these were forecast to improve following special offers to visitors who park at the less popular outlying car parks.

Councillor Smith acknowledged the misuse of the Residents Parking Scheme, but confirmed to Councillor Barlow that the new scheme had been submitted to Essex County Council for approval. It was envisaged that changes to the scheme would eliminate much of the misuse, for example, restrictions on large commercial vehicles, stricter enforcement action and efforts to prevent the black market of selling on tickets.

Councillor Smith confirmed to Councillor Taylor that there had not, to his knowledge been a reduction in member development courses and that the Council had embarked on joint working with Tendring and Ipswich to provide many member development courses. Councillor Smith also said the Debt Management Policy had been revised, primarily due to a keenness to separate 'cannot pays' from 'will not pays' and to provide a quicker response to debt, which has been proven to reduce levels of debt. Councillor Smith was unaware of any substantial debts e.g. multiple years of rent arrears. In response to Councillor Young, Councillor Smith said he would look favourably to including an article on debt management in the Courier that would also advise local people on whom to contact for advice.

Councillor Smith confirmed that the Essex County Council Portfolio Holder for Environment and Waste, Councillor Tracey Chapman would not be sanctioning the release of the £100,000 grant for improving recycling.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Smith for attending the meeting and appearing without supporting officers.

RESOLVED that the panel;

- i) Noted the responses from the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Businesses
- ii) Requested the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Businesses, given the economic downturn, to ensure the local Courier included an article on debt management, advising local people on whom to contact for advice.

Councillor Peter Higgins (in respect of his wife being the Portfolio Holder for Culture, Tourism and Diversity) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

35. Review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Culture, Tourism and Diversity

Councillor Theresa Higgins gave a brief summary of the work within her portfolio.

Councillor Naish responded by praising the staff of Colchester's Visiting Centre, for their excellent work.

In response to Councillor Barlow, Councillor Higgins said the economic downturn could have a positive effect on local tourism, with people staying local and taking holidays in Britain rather than abroad. Special offers e.g. at the Castle would help encourage people to local attractions, though Councillor Higgins said there was still the need for 'local boutique hotels' and improved large conference facilities in the area, and this would hopefully be addressed through the renaissance programme.

Councillor Higgins concurred with Councillor Young that the town centre needed a greater variety of major retail outlets to reflect young people's tastes, e.g. Primark, Zara and H & M, and the Council needed to learn (and engage) from the way young people had responded recently to this issue on 'Face Book'. Councillor Higgins also expressed a need for vigilance in ensuring only those retail outlets that maintain high ethical standards in terms of the pay and conditions of employees are considered as suitable retail outlets.

Councillor Higgins confirmed to the panel that progress was being made in achieving level 3 of the Equality Standard, and the Council would be assessed externally with the Equality Standard implemented within a year.

Councillor Higgins confirmed to Councillor Young that she had seen the first draft of the Firstsite Business Plan, though she did not know how Firstsite would respond to the

economic downturn, given the expensive costs involved with the supporting art programmes. Councillor Higgins said the branding logos on the Firstsite Business Plan, including Firstsite, the Mercury Theatre and Colchester Arts Centre, would need to have the Colchester Borough Council logo added, to reflect the Council's ongoing support of the organisation.

In response to Councillor Arnold, Councillor Higgins said it was still the intention of the partnership group (Colchester Borough Council, Essex County Council, The Mercury Theatre, Colchester Arts Centre and Firstsite, to continue the cultural legacy for Colchester by holding a major exhibition and that consideration was being given to an autumn Colchester Festival, to be held every other year.

In response to the outcomes of the 4 November review of the Roman Heritage, Councillor Higgins said at present there was no provision in the 2009-10 Budget for the reinstatement of the Heritage Fund Reserve, and officers are still working on submitted bids in reference to innovative ways of marketing Colchester's Roman Heritage, and this would be considered, subject to funds, though she reiterated that the Roman Heritage would continue to be preserved.

Councillor Hazell congratulated the Portfolio Holder for this years town centre Christmas lights which she considered good and tasteful.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Higgins for attending the meeting and appearing without supporting officers.

RESOLVED that the panel noted the responses from the Portfolio Holder for Culture, Tourism and Diversity.