

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

7 APRIL 2009

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

Substitute Members :- Councillor Ray Gamble for Councillor Mark Cory
Councillor Dennis Willetts for Councillor Gaye Pyman

52. Urgent Items

Councillor Naish addressed the panel, saying that following the letter received by all Councillors from Banner Holdings Limited, and in regards to the issue of the personal liability of Councillors, the ongoing embarrassment to the Council and other matters, he requested the Chairman to agree to this issue being discussed by the panel.

Chairman, Councillor Arnold said that there was a legal entitlement of the Council to give five clear working days notice to members of the public in providing details of the items to be discussed at meetings, unless the Chairman decides it would be in the public's interest to hear an item and there was not sufficient time to publish the details. Councillor Arnold said he did not think this issue needed to be dealt with as a matter of urgency and that it could effectively be dealt with by the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel at their meeting on the 28 April 2009 when the meeting will be fully devoted to the review of the Firstsite:Newsite funding arrangements.

53. Minutes

The minute of the meeting of the 17 March 2009 was confirmed as a correct record.

54. Items requested by members of the Panel and other Members

Councillor Arnold said the item requested by Councillor Naish could be evaluated by the panel, though this was not relevant to the panel's responsibilities, and should be considered by the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel (FASP) as part of their review on the 28 April 2009.

Councillor Hogg said that if the panel could be assured that this issue would be addressed within a report to go to FASP at the meeting of the Firstsite:Newsite review, in the public domain and open to scrutiny, he would be happy for this to be discussed on that evening.

Councillor Naish said he believed that due to the threatening letter received by Councillors, the large sums of money involved in the dispute and the disgraceful

behaviour of some people that this matter should be discussed as a matter of urgency.

Mr. Adrian Pritchard, Chief Executive of Colchester Borough Council addressed the panel to confirm that a report that would encompass the issue's and concerns expressed by Councillor Naish could be drafted for the FASP consideration, along with two other reports including one from the Audit Commission. Mr. Pritchard confirmed he had not seen the final Audit Commission report, but that it would be reported to FASP.

RESOLVED that the panel agreed that a report encompassing the issue's and concerns expressed by Councillor Naish should be drafted and presented to the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel meeting of the 28 April 2009, in conjunction with the review of the financial arrangements of Firstsite:Newsite.

55. Decisions taken under special urgency provisions

The Chairman confirmed to the panel that he had agreed to approve two key decisions under the special urgency provisions. The two decisions are consultation responses to the Parking Standards Report and the Tendring Core Strategy. Councillor Arnold explained that when the consultations were received, there was not, due to the response deadlines, sufficient time to put on the Council's Forward Plan.

56. Work Programme 2008-09

RESOLVED that;

- i) The rolling work programme was noted.
- ii) The panel agreed to meet at an extra meeting as soon as possible, to consider two outstanding items on the work programme, i) The review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Planning, and ii) The final report on 'New build Nuclear Power Station at Bradwell'.

Councillor Margaret Kimberley (in respect of a Board Member of Colchester Borough Homes) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

Councillor Julie Young (in respect of the spouse of a Board Member of Colchester Borough Homes) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

57. Review of the work of the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods

Councillor Beverley Oxford, Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods attended the meeting for this item and addressed the panel.

Councillor Oxford said she was passionate about her Neighbourhood responsibilities, a view shared by the officers with whom she was in daily contact.

Councillor Oxford said she had adopted a hands on approach, and gave a long list of service areas and officers that she had spent time with in the last ten months to get a feel for and a better understanding of the good work, the problems and difficulties experienced by officers.

Councillor Oxford explained that the Homelessness Strategy was implemented in July 2008 and the Housing Strategy was adopted in October 2008, both subject to continual monitoring. Councillor Oxford was a member of the Asset Management Board, receiving regular updates on progress and the Colne Housing Board, and was hopeful the Decent Homes Programme (DHP) would recommence in November 2009.

In response to Councillor Kimberley, Councillor Oxford said Colchester compared favourably with other similar councils in regards to homelessness. The Homelessness Team are proactive in their work, working tirelessly with families to try to prevent homeless situations.

In response to Councillor Hogg, Councillor Oxford said the DHP would probably be completed by 2012, that the Government had now realised the target of making all homes decent by 2010 was not realistic. Councillor Oxford said that although the Council would strive to meet this target, in effect, homes will always need repairing or refurbishing and this would become an ongoing rolling work programme.

In response to Councillor Young, Councillor Oxford said the upkeep and maintenance of garage sites is a low priority, but accepted the difficulty that they attract anti social behaviour. Councillor Oxford said there still remained 1,000 timber framed and single glazed Council properties in the borough that would require three to four million pounds to refurbish, though she was confident of the funding to complete the works on outstanding kitchens and bathrooms. Confirmation was given of the recent tendering process to award contracts for fitting new windows and doors (to start soon), and the contract for the repairs service for doors and kitchens to void properties (awarded). Councillor Oxford agreed for the panel to have an update on the work involved on garage sites.

Ms. Lindsay Barker, Head of Strategic Policy and Regeneration said it was a national issue about the shortfall in funding available for capital works programmes in general beyond the decent homes standard, and there is consultation underway on the Housing Subsidy approach and the impact on capital works within the Housing Revenue Account. There is an awareness to the extent of works that is beyond the current means of the capital available as in other Councils.

In response to Councillor Naish, the panel agreed that officers should provide an information note to members on the national issue of tenants being evicted from properties due to the repossession of the property by the mortgagee when the

landlord / property owner forfeits on the property mortgage.

Councillor Oxford confirmed to Councillor Taylor that homelessness remained a top priority for the Council. Councillor Oxford said the homelessness team was extremely competent and doing a very good job. The financial downturn could increase the work volume, and informative leaflets are being given to local residents for seeking help at the earliest opportunity. Though debt and mortgage advisors are on hand to attempt to help residents to stay in their homes, should the economic downturn cause a resources problem, Councillor Oxford promised she would fight her corner to have the appropriate resources available. Councillor Oxford also confirmed that in regards to the Housing Strategy, the Council consulted with private developers, the voluntary sector, Colchester Borough Homes, residents associations and the public sector to bring about an inclusive strategy. A website was being established, that would communicate to, and inform residents, with a framework in place to engage and get feedback from residents.

Ms. Barker confirmed that work was progressing and on track in regards to the Anglian Water sewerage programme. Further to the enquiry from Councillor Kimberley regarding temporary accommodation at 60 Creffield Road, the panel requested an informative note on the progress from the Head of Life Opportunities.

Councillor Oxford said she hoped the Ascot House, the temporary accommodation property would be redeveloped, with the site being big enough to demolish for the purpose of providing purpose built properties for homeless people and an ongoing presence from the appropriate agencies, though she emphasised that registered social landlords had only given a vague expression of interest. Councillor Oxford further confirmed that whilst it was the long term intention to close both temporary accommodation properties in Military Road, one of these properties would in the meantime undergo refurbishment.

Ms. Barker confirmed to Councillor Kimberley that the key dates of the Housing Review are the report on the current situation in May 2009 and the outcome of the review in October 2009.

In response to Councillor Willetts, Councillor Oxford said at the start of each year the total budget for Aids and Adaptations (AA) is already allocated to a planned programme of work, so yes, she was continually asking for further funding and confirmed the virement to the AA budget had been approved that had allowed for additional work. In regards to the Decent Homes Programme, Councillor Oxford understood the concerns expressed by Councillor Willetts and Arnold that there was a justified perception that rural areas are always at the back of the queue, and reassured them that the remaining programme would not be scheduled on a geographical basis, but on a needs and priority basis.

Councillor Oxford confirmed to Councillor Willetts that the 2006 and 2008 surveys revealed there was under ten people sleeping rough in the town, and that the Government rules are that when under ten the local authority are not obliged to carry out further surveys. Councillor Oxford said that the Council would continue to survey, though she was confident through the current arrangements with the Night Shelter and

village and community halls that this potential problem was appropriately monitored and managed.

Councillor Willetts expressed reassurance from the responses of Councillor Oxford. Councillor Gamble appreciated the passion in which Councillor Oxford carried out her portfolio duties.

Ms. Barker confirmed to Councillor Gamble that the Council did retain a 'Sensitive Lets' list. Councillor Gamble requested an informative note on the Council's approach from the Head of Life Opportunities.

In response to Councillors Gamble and Arnold enquiry concerning rural nominations, Ms. Barker was asked to provide panel members with an informative note on rural nominations and the legal position around this.

Councillor Oxford confirmed to Councillor Arnold that the criteria for the order of the DHP implementation were laid down in the report to the January Cabinet meeting.

Councillor Arnold thanked Councillor Oxford for attending the meeting and her response to the panel and wished her good luck with her future work.

RESOLVED that the panel:

- i) Noted the responses from the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and thanked her for attending the meeting.
- ii) Requested an informative note from the Head of Life Opportunities on the national issue of tenants being evicted from properties due to the repossession of the property by the mortgagee when the landlord / property owner forfeits on the property mortgage.
- iii) Requested an update from the Head of Strategic Policy and Regeneration on the work involved on garage sites.
- iv) Requested an informative note from the Head of Life Opportunities on the progress of the work involving the temporary accommodation at 60 Creffield Road.
- v) Requested an informative note from the Head of Strategic Policy and Regeneration on rural nominations and the legal position around this.
- vi) Requested that Councillor Gamble receives a response on the Council's approach to "Sensitive Lets" from the Head of Life Opportunities.

Councillor Julie Young (in respect of being a Member of Essex County Council) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

58. Review of the work of the Leader of the Council, Portfolio Holder for Strategy

Councillor Turrell, The Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy attended the meeting and gave a short presentation on the work she has been involved in during her first year as the Leader of the Council.

During her presentation and in response to panel members, Councillor Turrell confirmed that the three major partnerships remained with Essex County Council, the Haven Gateway Partnership and Regional City East, though the partnerships and relationships for each are different.

In response to Councillor Young, Councillor Turrell said the Haven Gateway Partnership was working well and there was soon to be an announcement concerning the funding of the Town Centre Cultural Quarter and St Botolphs Station projects. Councillor Turrell also said that this project whilst in Colchester was to the benefit of the whole gateway region and was secured through the partnership working.

In regards to traffic congestion Councillor Turrell said that the Council was working in partnership with Essex County Council and two major landowners to provide an A12 junction to North Colchester linked to a 1,000 car 'park and ride' facility, an overall development that Colchester could not have done alone, but which Colchester was definitely leading on. Councillor Turrell said it was hoped this would be in place by 2011, and that some of the funding would only be available is used for this purpose within this timeframe. Councillor Turrell confirmed to Councillor Willetts that this was the major scheme for tackling traffic congestion in Colchester, but coupled with this the Council was working on numerous other small schemes to improve traffic flow.

Later in the discussions, Councillor Turrell, responded to Councillor Taylor, confirming that Regional Cities East are looking at transport issues in this region, both road and train.

Councillor Turrell, in response to Councillor Arnold said the Braintree Partnership still remained, and although the only partnership service that has transpired was for Parking Services, regular six monthly meetings will continue to nurture a closer partnership with Braintree, and similar partnership discussions would continue with Tendring. Geographically the three districts councils were close with similar problems so it made sense to continue partnership discussions. Councillor Turrell said whilst she was supportive of a Unitary Authority, this did not form any part of these discussions. Later, Councillor Turrell said to Councillor Taylor that the Administration would consult with all members on future work in regards to Unitary status.

In response to Councillor Naish, Councillor Turrell said questions concerning the overseeing of the Visual Arts Facility project should be directed to Councillor Hunt to whom she had delegated this responsibility. Councillor Turrell said what had surprised her most in the time she has been Leader was how well the Cabinet members worked together, given they were comprised of members from three different groups. She said it had not all been easy, but she was proud of what they had all achieved.

In response to Councillors Arnold and Willetts, Councillor Turrell said the Administration was committed to Colchester's Heritage, forming part of the Community

Development strand of the Strategic Plan. Councillor Turrell confirmed that the strategy was still to promote cultural activities in Colchester, though she understood the disappointment of members for the loss of budget funding for the Chariot Circus, though the responsible Portfolio Holder would be dealing with this specific issue.

Councillor Turrell said she did not like the way such a great deal of hers, and other Portfolio Holder's time was spent chasing funding for various projects, thereby leaving little time to give to other important issues, though she understood as frustrating as it was, it was necessary.

Councillor Turrell agreed with Councillor Arnold that the consultation on the Strategic Plan as undertaken in the Courier had returned a very disappointing response, though the Council does provide for the public to respond on Council matters on the website, Angel Court Screens and other consultations, and all these strands of communication were taken into account when the Strategic Plan was drafted.

In response to Councillor Gamble, Councillor Turrell said she felt equally passionate about Mile End and Colchester, and whilst her priority was to Colchester, she did not think her roles as Leader, Ward Councillor or County Councillor compromised the work of these roles.

RESOLVED that the panel noted the responses from the Leader of the Council, Portfolio Holder for Strategy and thanked her for attending the meeting.

59. Responsibilities of the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regeneration (in preparation for the next meeting)

RESOLVED that;

i) The panel noted the responsibilities of the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regeneration in preparation for the next meeting.

ii) The panel advised the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regeneration that the panel would seek responses from her on;

- The regeneration of the Hythe
- The Council's consultation response to Tendring District Council's Core Strategy, and specifically, the Crown Interchange and the creation of 800 new homes and 1,300 new jobs.