

9 July 2024

Report of	Matt Sterling, Head of Economic Growth	Author	Karen Turnbull ☎ 282915
Title	Community use of Colchester City Council Assets and curating Colchester City Centre's Public Spaces		
Wards affected	All Wards		

1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report updates Scrutiny Panel on the Council's approach and policy towards the use of the community assets which it owns following the discussions at their meetings in August 2023 and February 2024. It also provides information for the Panel about more recent work to programme and coordinate activity in public spaces.

2. Action Required

2.1 Scrutiny Panel is asked to consider the report and note the work in progress.

3. Reason for Scrutiny

3.1 At the meeting of the Scrutiny Panel on 9 August 2023 it was resolved that the Panel adds an item to its work programme to clarify the Council's approach and policy towards the use of community assets which it owns.

3.2 Such an update was given to Scrutiny Panel in February 2024. Since then, our work in this field has developed further to consider with partners how we support them to programme activity in the City Centre's public spaces.

4. Background Information

4.1 The Council has an extensive asset base which includes buildings and spaces. Some of these have multiple uses such as the Town Hall which is used for civic, operational, and commercial activity.

4.2 As was reported to Panel in February, many assets are used by Community Groups. The approach to the use of each asset needs to take account several criteria, including the cost of maintaining the asset, the needs of the use for support, the effect of the use on service provision and the suitability of the use for the asset.

4.3 For assets used for events and programmed by Colchester Events, the Council has an Events Policy which states:

“While registered charities and non-profit making community groups may be offered a “charitable hire rate”, costs will still be passed to the event organiser to ensure no additional burden on the Council (or CATL), although these costs will be kept as low as possible”.

4.4 In February it was noted the impracticality of having a blanket policy for free community use of all our assets as their fees and charges are needed to cover our costs and support budgets.

4.5 As part of the wider review of our assets, an asset plan will be developed to look across the estate for opportunities for individual assets. This work will also include improving the way we manage our assets and take into account our strategic priorities, budget challenges and operational considerations. This will include a refreshed governance framework and opportunities for cross party member engagement.

4.6 The Panel have expressed a particular interest in the Bandstand in Castle Park. Following their meeting in February we have clarified that:

- Engagement with stakeholders has taken place
- No charge is levied for use of the bandstand
- A booking system is operated to avoid clashes; ensure any equipment, seating or power needed is available; and to minimize disturbances
- The number of bandstand bookable slots has been increased to 20 and Officers have agreed dates with key community partners with consideration to the overall programming of the park.

4.7 Following the previous Panel discussions, Officers have started to engage partners to consider the best community use of other non-building assets such as existing public spaces and those being improved or introduced through our Town Deal programme. Initially this work is focussed on the City Centre.

4.8 This review is important as City Centres are undergoing intense change. Competition from online and out-of-town shopping are two of the factors driving this change. There is a need to:

- Animate the city centre in particular to create a place where people want to be

- Increase dwell time and therefore – hopefully - spend
- Enhance the image and reputation of Colchester as an even more desirable place to live, work, study, visit and do business
- Encourage repeat visits/trips to Colchester (loyalty to the place)
- Add value to the experience of the city centre
- Encourage more coordination and partnership working
- Realise Colchester's potential as a city once more

4.9 To progress this review Officers have held 1-to-1 meetings with a wide range of stakeholders including those who currently deliver events, those representing businesses, and those who regulate events. Officers have also engaged other local authorities Economic Development teams and national organisations such as the Association for Town & City Management and British Business Improvement Districts. As a result of these meetings a SWOT analysis has been prepared to understand what is and isn't working well at the moment and what opportunities exist. A review of locations has been conducted to ensure we understand the features, opportunities and limits of each site. Most recently an in-person workshop has been held with these stakeholders to consider the learning from the review so far and to start to agree a proposed draft new approach.

4.10 Historic England acknowledges that Colchester is a place of small public spaces rather than big plazas. There is competition for space: business operations (deliveries, waste), local people, visitors, blue light services, maintenance services, local people, lobby groups all need access to this urban space for different reasons at different times.

4.11 There are trends in how urban spaces are being developed, mainly by Business Improvement Districts such as the Our Colchester BID. This is seeing urban centres fast becoming 'experiential' rather than simply 'transactional'. These trends were prevalent pre-Pandemic and appear to be sustaining and accelerating.

4.12 With city centre regeneration now underway there is an opportunity to review what is happening in order to realise the potential of the city centre.

4.13 Colchester is very fortunate to have the multi-award winning Castle Park located in the city centre just off the High Street and so there is an opportunity to explore the relationship between the park and city centre public spaces.

4.14 A set of objectives has been established for this project which are to:

- Take advantage of the opportunity of new public spaces coming forward with the regeneration of St Nicholas and Trinity Squares
- Understand the nature of these public spaces and the constraints and opportunities which each have
- Add value to events taking place across the city
- Provide clarity around roles and responsibilities
- Make recommendations for future coordination and management of events

4.15 The next steps for this review are to:

- Consider the outputs from the stakeholder workshop (July 2024)

- Prepare a draft proposal for a new whole-system approach including roles and responsibilities for partners (July 24)
- Convene a small working group of key partners to refine and complete this proposal (August 24)
- Share this proposal with Officers and stakeholders for consultation (September 24)
- Bring the proposal to Senior Management for consideration (October 24)
- Ensure the appropriate Member or Member Panel approves the approach depending on its form. This may depend on whether it constitutes a new working practice or a new policy (November 24)

5.0 Conclusions to date

5.1 The conclusions so far are that:

- This review is timely
- There is increasing competition for space in the city centre and so better coordination is welcome
- Partners welcome a positive balance between the Council's regulatory functions and our desire to support the vibrancy of the Centre
- We have an agreed way forward

6 Equality, Diversity and Human Rights implications

6.1 The Events policy seeks to ensure a fair and transparent approach to community use of the Council's assets. Our review of activity in public spaces seeks to ensure all Colchester's communities benefit and any decision will include an equality impact assessment.

6.2 The Council's Economic Strategy 2023-25 considers equality, diversity and human rights implications through its [Equality Impact Statement](#).

7 Standard References

7.1 There are no particular references to consultation or publicity considerations or financial; community safety; health and safety, environmental and sustainability or risk management implications.

8 Strategic Plan References

8.1 The programme of curation of public spaces is driven by the Council's [Strategic Plan 2020-23](#) objectives:

- Growing our economy so that everyone benefits
- Respond to the climate emergency
- Delivering modern services for a modern city
- Improving health, well-being and happiness