

## **POLICY AND PUBLIC INITIATIVES PANEL**

### **20 January 2020**

**Attendees:** Councillors Arnold, Coleman, Jowers, Loveland, Scordis and Warnes.

**Substitutes:** Councillor Scott-Boutell for Councillor Chuah.

**Also Present:** Councillors Harris and J. Young.

#### **45. Minutes**

*RESOLVED* that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 November 2019 be confirmed as a correct record.

#### **46. Next steps regarding options for Colchester High Street: agreeing objectives, gathering data and consulting stakeholders and the public**

**Councillor Jowers (by reason of being a member of Essex County Council) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7 (5).**

The Chairman clarified that this item was to discuss the future of Colchester High Street in general terms and consider the potential for reducing the amount of traffic using it.

Sir Bob Russell addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1). Sir Bob gave his view that pedestrianisation of the High Street would disturb the equilibrium of the Town centre and should not be introduced. Banning traffic from the High Street would cause problems for the surrounding areas and would disrupt bus networks. Sir Bob estimated that around 80% of the Town centre was already pedestrianised.

Sir Bob Russell raised issues which he believed should be addressed instead. These included a review of bus stop placements in the Town Centre, and improvement in paving especially where damaged, such as at the southern end of West Stockwell Street.

A member of the Panel described historic investigations carried out on traffic movements using the High Street, around the year 2000. These had shown that many vehicles used the High Street as a through route. It was put forward that these were the journeys which should be re-directed to alternative routes, by finding ways to lower congestion in other parts of Colchester.

Mr Nick Chilvers addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings

General Procedure Rule 5(1) and raised his concern over weaknesses in the Town's road network, especially in the South East. Of particular concern was the difficulty in reaching the A12 or facilities in the North of Town, as experienced by those living to the South East, from Middlewick to Rowhedge. Mr Chilvers asked if the Borough Council had influence on the County Council's transport strategy.

Mr Chilvers further questioned what demolition work would be required to allow the proposed Rapid Transit System (RTS) to be routed into Colchester and requested that High Street pedestrianisation be avoided and other traffic issues be prioritised.

Karen Syrett, Housing and Planning Manager, introduced the report, which was an update on progress since the report the Panel received on Colchester High Street in January 2019. The report covered impacts on the High Street, Town Centre, and beyond. It referenced the Rapid Transit System (RTS) and the County Council's emerging Transport Strategy, both of which have evolved over the past twelve months, with the draft Transport Strategy due for consultation in the near future, whilst the RTS scheme had gained millions in Government funding. The recently-announced Towns Fund was described, with work progressing on the Town Deal which will be needed for Colchester to successfully bid for up to £25m in central government funding. The objectives for this were for long-term economic and productivity growth, encompassing land use and regeneration, improvements to skills and enterprise, and connectivity (both digital and transport links). These issues were seen as being interconnected, and so officers were considering them in this context.

The relationship between the new Strategic Priorities and Colchester High Street were highlighted, in particular the priorities for the Town Centre, and on promoting the use of walking and cycling links. There were a range of possible options, from doing nothing through to full pedestrianisation. Research and consultation would be necessary to inform the Town Deal and the related investment plan.

Matthew Brown, Economic Development Manager, provided further information on work towards the Town Deal Plan, which was expected to be ready by June/July of this year. The content was specific, such as a focus on infrastructure, enabling measures and the mitigation of identified blocking factors. A small team had been and was being appointed to oversee the necessary work, including an engagement officer. The Town Deal area included much of the residential area of Colchester and much of the key infrastructure.

A member of the Panel noted that the possibility of High Street pedestrianisation had been raised several times over past decades, that the RTS and link roads are related to the North Essex Garden Communities Project and that it was not expected that this would necessitate any demolitions. Addressing the points made by Mr Chilvers, a number of Panel members agreed that there was potential and need for a Southern bypass and/or relief road, especially were further development be carried out to the South of Colchester. This would be of use to villages to the South of the Town, and help improve East-West links from Tendring, easing pressure on existing links. It was further opined that Essex County Council (ECC) did listen to its partners, including borough and district councils, and that Colchester Borough Council (CBC) had additional links to ECC, with a member of CBC also being the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure at ECC.

The Panel noted that the Colchester bus network primarily ran through the Town Centre, and especially the High Street, potentially due to roads around the centre being as heavily congested as the High Street. The Panel queried whether, as part of a consultation exercise, the feasibility of changing bus routes could be assessed, potentially to see if these could avoid using the High Street. Past suggestions had included a circular bus route around the Town, possibly using electric buses and including a transport hub near Colchester's main railway station.

A Panel member opined that bus routes offered and fares charged were evidence that buses were a low priority. Routes were not convenient for those with restricted mobility and some areas, particularly rural areas, had been reduced to an hourly or once-every-two-hours service. Residents often saw this as a disincentive to use buses rather than their cars and the Panel member suggested that efforts should be made to investigate whether some services could be provided by community interest groups, where gaps existed. The Housing and Planning Manager cautioned that the Council would need to adhere to rules relating to state aid, should it look at options for community bus provision. Rachel Forkin further advised that community demand would need to be evidenced before a community bus service could be introduced. The Panel noted that there was often a difference between what respondents to consultations said they wanted, and what they would actually use, and that this should be borne in mind.

Concern was raised that the County Council's Transport Strategy was emerging before the work to set out a vision for Colchester could produce results, potentially leading to a transport strategy being put in place prior to the vision that it should be designed to support. It was queried whether this could potentially limit the options for the centre of Colchester.

The Housing and Planning Manager confirmed that the four potential routes for the proposed link road all aimed to avoid the need for demolition of existing properties. She further agreed that significant forward planning was needed to examine ways to progress towards the building of a southern relief road. It was also confirmed that ECC had worked with bus operators on the drafting of their emerging Transport Strategy, but that it was not known if this had included discussion of route changes. It was known that bus operators were concerned at parking prices in Colchester being relatively low, thus incentivising car use over buses. It was considered possible to develop the vision for Colchester alongside the new transport strategy. The emerging Transport Strategy would not be finalised for some time to come following an engagement exercise.

The Panel requested more detail on funding secured for the RTS and the A120/133 Link Road. The Housing and Planning Manager confirmed that £99.9 million of government funding had been secured toward the cost of the RTS and the Link Road, with more secured via Section 106 agreements. Concern was raised by Panel members that, should the West Tey North Essex Garden Community go ahead, there would be additional strain on the road links through to Ipswich and Tendring. Should development also occur in the Middlewick area, it was argued by a Panel member that measures would need to be taken to assist through traffic in diverting around that area.

A Panel member focused on the report being a report on the High Street and that efforts should be made to press for improvements in the existing paving and reduction in traffic density. It was affirmed that this was in context of needing to examine the future for the wider Town and that all stakeholders would need to work together, including ECC, CBC and bus companies to provide traffic reduction, better bus routes, relief roads and other measures to support the Town centre vision, once created. The Housing and Planning Manager confirmed that this was the approach being pursued by Council officers. She further confirmed that she would investigate an ongoing and specific traffic issue raised by Councillor Scott Boutell and concerning Warren Lane.

The future development of Park and Ride in Colchester was discussed and the Housing and Planning Manager explained that no specific location for an eastern terminus had been identified, but that an additional Park and Ride from the East of Town was being considered and was recognised as being desirable, given the growth expected to the East of Colchester.

The Panel reiterated the importance of considering any knock-on effects that changes to the High Street might have and drew on past experience of where changes had caused problems in the surrounding road network. The Panel did, however, welcome the proposed examination of different options and ideas to reduce traffic density through the High Street, potentially including improvements to alternative cross-town routes. This would provide the best change of producing a more-successful urban network.

*RESOLVED* that the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel had noted and discussed the report.

*RECOMMENDED* to CABINET that alongside consultation and engagement exercises linked to each of the above work programmes, Officers commission a study looking at the options for reducing traffic in the High Street.

#### **47. Secure and Covered Cycle Storage Options**

Mr William Bramhill addressed the Panel pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1). Mr Bramhill spoke to agree with the report's recommendations and request that pressure be exerted to improve the requirements for provision of cycle storage to be included in new-build residential developments, which in his view was currently insufficient and acted as a disincentive to modal shift from car use to cycling as an alternative.

The Panel raised caution that any requirements laid down for cycle storage within individual dwellings may be used for purposes other than cycle storage. A Panel member highlighted the issue of high-density developments, where space for external covered storage was reduced, and any provision of internal storage would act to increase property prices. It was further suggested that briefings on Section 106 requirements be expanded to specify requirements for cycle storage in new developments.

It was ventured by a Panel member that secure public cycle storage in the Town Centre and key areas was the crucial issue to be addressed, as the lack of such

storage disincentivises the use of bicycles. Traditional cycle racks did not act sufficiently to deter theft or prevent damage, and it was put forward that cyclists should be asked for recommendations as to where to site secure covered storage in the Borough. The Panel agreed that cycling would be encouraged if cyclists could be given safer cycle routes and secure and protective cycle storage throughout Colchester.

Officers were asked to see whether data regarding the level of usage of electric bikes was available.

A discussion was held on the potential difficulties in siting secure storage areas in Colchester High Street, including the current one-way system, which resulted in cyclists from the East of Town having to dismount and push their bikes to where existing (unsecured) cycle racks are currently located. Several possible sites were suggested, including the Town Hall car park on St. Runwald Street, Holy Trinity Church and Vineyard Street Car Park and other car parks within the Town. The Town Hall car park was covered by a monitored CCTV system, whilst Holy Trinity Church could be used to provide covered storage in an easily-monitored location. Empty retail units were also suggested as a possible site for a cycle storage and repair centre for the Town Centre. A Panel member informed the Panel that the founder of 'Repair, Reuse and Recycle', Chris Blomley, had requested help to set up a centre which would include a bicycle repair service, amongst other services.

The Panel agreed that it would be worthwhile for officers to explore options for both secure public cycle storage at key locations, and options for secure and covered cycle storage in residential areas, consulting with residents as appropriate. It was suggested that land owned by the Council in residential estates could be used for residents' covered cycle storage. The cost of this was noted as being much higher than unsecured storage but would offer far better protection from damage or theft. Use of CCTV covering unsecured storage would increase safety but would be less reliable than secured storage. The Chairman argued that better advice and education should be provided to cyclists on how to maximise the security and protection of bicycles when parked.

In addition, it was noted that there remained broken links in the Colchester cycling network, which should be addressed. Rachel Forkin, Transport and Sustainability Manager, gave assurance that work was being conducted on wider cycling initiatives for the Borough, and that this included possible storage improvements and joining up the cycle network where links are currently not present. She laid out a number of possible options for Town Centre and residential secure parking and emphasised the need for any installation to be demand-led. Wide consultation would be required to identify need, and requirements for management and access arrangements would then be considered for each type of storage proposed. A Panel member noted that Colchester Town Station and the Hythe (Essex) Station did not have secure cycle storage options and so little cycle parking was to be seen at those locations. It was also noted that provision of station cycle parking was not within the Council's remit but was a responsibility of Network Rail.

The Panel stressed the need for any storage areas to be well-lit and overlooked by properties and passing pedestrians. This would be vital to ensure that cyclists felt safe utilising them.

The Transport and Sustainability Manager explained that she would obtain cost details for the range of options for secured cycle storage, should a recommendation be made and agreed to take this work further. The Housing and Planning Manager informed the Panel that it might be possible to bid for and obtain funding for cycle storage from the Town Fund, as part of the overall bid for this funding.

Councillor Julie Young attended and with the consent of the Chair addressed the Panel. Councillor Young explained that she had conducted a fact-finding visit to the 'Mini-Holland' area in Waltham Forest, which was aimed at improving links, safety and experiences for cyclists and pedestrians. She informed the Panel that the scheme had proved to be very successful, and that the secure and covered cycle storage option used there for residents' parking involved half-moon storage units, with keys provided to residents, which stored five or six bicycles each and cost around £2,500 per unit.

*RESOLVED* that the report had been noted and discussed.

*RECOMMENDED* to CABINET that officers be directed to explore options for secure and covered public cycle storage in the Town Centre and at key locations, and explore options for secure and covered cycle storage in residential areas, consulting with residents as appropriate and sourcing information as to the cost of potential options to meet identified demand. This should be carried out as part of wider work already progressing on cycle initiatives and efforts to complete the network of cycle routes in Colchester.

#### **48. Work Programme 2019/20**

The Panel considered the draft Work Programme for 2019/20. It was noted that the next meeting of the Panel would cover items on the Council's approach to supporting those residents in receipt of Universal Credit, and on a comparison of the Committee and Cabinet models of council administration.

The Panel requested that the results of consultations carried out relating to the High Street/Town centre be reported back to the Panel at such time as this is possible, and that this be provisionally scheduled in to the 2020/21 work programme as soon as it is possible to ascertain when this will be available. Mandy Jones, Assistant Director – Place and Client Services, stated that there was to be a planned information-only report to be provided to the Panel at its September meeting, which would give an update on all the work which had progressed from all items considered by the Panel in 2019/20, and from recommendations made by the Panel.

*RESOLVED* that the Work Programme for 2019/20 be noted.