

# STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

## 13 DECEMBER 2011

*Present :-* Councillor Dennis Willetts (Chairman)  
Councillors Nigel Chapman, Nick Cope, Bill Frame,  
Theresa Higgins, Gerard Oxford and Will Quince

*Substitute Members :-* Councillor Mike Hardy for Councillor Andrew Ellis  
Councillor Michael Lilley for Councillor Kim Naish  
Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell  
for Councillor Colin Sykes

*Also in Attendance :-* Councillor Tina Dopson  
Councillor Beverley Oxford  
Councillor Paul Smith  
Councillor Anne Turrell  
Councillor Tim Young

### 23. Minutes

The minutes of the meetings held on the 29 November were confirmed as a correct record.

**Councillor Anne Turrell and Councillor Theresa Higgins (in respect of her membership of Essex County Council) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)**

### 24. 2011-12 6-Monthly Performance report

Councillor Anne Turrell, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance and Ms. Lucie Breadman, Head of Corporate Management attended the meeting for this item, a review of the 2011-12 6-monthly Performance Report.

Ms. Breadman gave an overview of the performance update for the period April to September 2011.

In terms of performance summary, 65% of performance indicators are forecast to meet year end targets, 17.5% are showing amber, and 17.5% are showing red, or forecast to not meet the year end expectation.

Ms. Breadman said there are some very positive results, with the number of affordable homes far exceeding the target and planning performance in all areas also exceeding the targets set.

Sickness absence continued to be challenging, though the problems are not universal across all services, with some areas recording a reduction in sickness levels. Sickness levels are being hindered by an increase in long term sickness and inherited sickness by staff from shared services, but that said, the Council are actively managing every case and ill health capability action has resulted in 11 individual cases of dismissal.

In response to Councillor Willetts, Ms. Breadman said whilst it was unlikely that the Council would reach the sickness rate target of 8 days per person per year, it would continue to strive to do so and, while it is a challenging target it is so important that we need to keep working hard towards that aim.. Ms. Breadman also said that it is harder to compare performance to other local authorities or the private sector as there is no set agreed way of recording and calculating sickness absence but where we can compare our performance is good. Councillor Turrell said the Cabinet wished the challenging target of 8 days per person per year to continue.

In response to Councillor Frame, Ms. Breadman said the implementation of the new sickness policy was now complete, and all managers have been trained. Sickness record statistics are provided to managers on a monthly basis. Ill health capability dismissals in Street Services were treated individually, non-related cases not connected to FSR changes implemented and she was not aware of any negative impact on sickness levels as a result of the four day collection changes.

In response to Councillor Oxford's request for further breakdown's on sickness statistics, Councillor Willetts said it was the responsibility of the Panel to ensure the Council is managing the performance strategy correctly, but any further detail should be for those Councillors who request the information. Ms. Breadman agreed to provide Councillor G. Oxford with the monthly manager's report on sickness levels.

In response to Councillor Cope, Ms. Breadman clarified target KI R4 Reduce CO2 emissions from local authority operations, saying the target was "to reduce emissions by 25% by December 2012", and while the formally recorded reduction to September was 14% performance is actually ahead of this and agreed to provide Councillor Cope with a breakdown of how the 25% reduction is projected to be achieved.

Mr. Mark Wright, Director of Property Services at Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) responded to Councillor Frame in regards to hard to let properties and how is this problem being tackled, saying the main problem was with Sheltered Accommodation, skewing the overall result of 24 days, due to an average re-let time of 66 days. Mr. Wright said a finance strategy to refurbish sheltered housing has been approved and will go some way to improving the 66 day re-let time. In response to Councillor Quince, Mr. Wright said the different schemes (general, sheltered and temporary) each have a different impact on the overall performance, with some individual properties skewing results, for example, a property marketed through Choice Based Lettings had remained vacant for 2 years. Mr. Wright confirmed that CBH are working closely with the Council to implement a strategy to improve the overall results whilst also looking to set challenging but realistic housing targets.

In response to Councillor Willetts, Ms. Breadman confirmed that the drop in performance to the number of weekly missed waste collections was in the main due to the implementation of the major changes to working practices as a result of the Street Services Fundamental Service Review. The changes have now settled in and performance has already improved in this area. Ms. Breadman said that as a result of new technology and process changes the targets in this area are likely to be revised for next year.

Responding to Councillor Quince, Councillor Turrell said in regards to the Council's LEXCEL accreditation, whilst it is accepted that many law firms do not use this accreditation that can be costly to retain, the cost will be considered in terms of value for money as part of the ongoing 2012-13 budget process, though as commented by Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Heritage, this accreditation may be a requirement for Legal Services to complete external work.

Ms. Breadman agreed to arrange for Councillor T. Higgins to be provided with further information in regards to the delivery of a number of projects with looked after children, children and young people with disabilities and young people from hard to reach groups, work done in association with Essex and Suffolk County Councils.

Councillor Turrell confirmed to Councillor Chapman that the securing of additional burial land will be concluded shortly and agreed to provide confirmation details to Councillor Chapman once known.

Councillor Turrell concurred with Councillor Scott-Boutell that local residents would welcome the implementation of the new Responsible Dog Ownership Strategy and confirmed to Councillor Scott-Boutell that she would ask Councillor Hunt, Portfolio Holder for Street and Waste Services to provide Councillor Scott-Boutell with details of the new Strategy. Councillor Quince was saddened by the need to put-down around 50 abandoned dogs a year, mainly Staffordshire Bull Terriers, and hoped the strategy would go some way to addressing the problem of abandoned dogs. Councillor Turrell said she would ask Councillor Hunt to contact Councillor Scott-Boutell to obtain volunteer contact details of people or groups who would be prepared to support this work.

Responding to Councillor Frame on the SP action on Air Quality, Councillor Turrell said Cabinet Members understood the issues around poor air quality in the Brook Street area, acknowledging that heavy traffic congestion was responsible for this. Councillor Turrell agreed to ask Councillor Hunt to provide further information on the joint working on this initiative between Essex County Council and Colchester.

Ms. Breadman confirmed to Councillor Willetts that the Council had hoped to acquire additional land from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to provide more allotments. However, this had not come to fruition. Councillor Tina Dopson, Portfolio Holder for Communities and Diversity said this initiative was a specific target, and had been progressing to a satisfactory conclusion, but the MoD is now reluctant to release this land so it will be necessary to remove this specific target from the new SP Action Plan.

Councillor Turrell informed Councillor Quince that he should contact Street Services for advice on determining how rogue opportunists can be prevented from putting recycling bins at recycling sites to the detriment of voluntary organisation's bins.

*RESOLVED* that the Panel:-

i) Thanked Councillor Turrell, Councillor Smith, Ms. Breadman and Mr. Wright for attending the meeting and responding to questions from the Panel.

ii) Considered and commented upon the combined performance update for the period up to the end of September 2011 in relation to the Council's key performance measures, and noted the progress update on the Strategic Plan Action Plan.

## **25. 2012/13 Revenue Budget and Financial Reserves**

Councillor Anne Turrell, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance and Mrs. Ann Hedges, Executive Director attended the meeting for this item, a review of the 2012/13 Revenue Budget and Financial Reserves.

Mrs. Hedges said the 2012/13 Revenue Budget was a precursor to the Budget Report to be reported to the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel and Cabinet in the New Year, though unfortunately due to the timing, it was not possible to provide the impact of the budget on the Strategic Plan, though this could be provided, if requested, in the New Year.

Mrs. Hedges spoke about the Formula Grant and New Homes Bonus. It has been confirmed that there will be, for 2012/13, a cash reduction of 9% on the 2011/12 grant level, as expected, and a New Homes Bonus in 2012/13 that will be very slightly less than the reported estimate of £1.5m.

Mrs. Hedges said the initial 2012/13 budget forecast presented to Cabinet on 12 October showed a budget gap of £742k, but now showed a broadly balanced budget position, though there remains a number of budget pressures.

Mrs. Hedges said the Council continues to look for efficiencies that will address the budget pressures, through Fundamental Service Reviews, looking at innovative ways of generating income through e.g. legal services / payroll services, Joint Partnerships and cuts and reductions to services.

In response to Councillor Quince, Mrs. Hedges confirmed that the new grant to authorities that do not increase Council Tax in 2012/13 would be equivalent in value to an increase in Council Tax of 2.5%, estimated at c£269k, was for a period on one year only, and from year two onwards this money will need to be found from other efficiencies.

Mrs. Hedges said the cost pressures caused by Insurance Premiums was due to the retendering process whereby the resulting overall cost, three years on from the previous retendering process, is greater due to the large increase in insurance premiums. Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Heritage confirmed that Essex County Council's change of rules on second homes rebates had been rolled out to all local authorities in Essex.

*RESOLVED* that the Panel:-

i) Thanked Councillor Turrell and Mrs. Hedges for attending the meeting and responding to questions from the Panel.

ii) Considered and noted the 2012/13 Revenue Budget and Financial Reserves prior to their consideration by the Cabinet on 25 January 2012.

## **26. Strategic Plan 2012-2015**

### **Have Your Say**

Mr. Nick Chilvers addressed the Panel concerning the new draft Strategic Plan (SP).

Mr. Chilvers said the SP lacked information on the local economy, and asked that as Essex fared better than other areas of Britain in terms of employment, will it cope when the impact of the potential housing growth kicks in? Mr. Chilvers didn't believe supporting culture and creativity was the correct way forward, that there needed to be more emphasis towards male related jobs in light industry, trades and apprenticeships. Whilst affordable housing was being built, for example, at the Garrison, Mr. Chilvers feared many homes would be occupied by unemployed people that itself would create a further social problem.

Mr. Chilvers believed the Council needed to be more pro-active in trying to create an industrial trading area(s) suitable for light industry, creating jobs / apprenticeships for the young. Mr. Chilvers asked that the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel asked the relevant Portfolio Holder to report to the Panel twice yearly with an update on local job creation with invitations going to large local employers, other public sector organisations, the JobCentre Plus and local small businesses.

Councillor Willetts thanked Mr. Chilvers for his comments, saying whilst some comments were valid, with job creation initiatives already in place, the criticisms were a bit harsh.

Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Heritage said manufacturing jobs only for males was a dated view, though the principal of pro-active job creation he very much endorsed. Councillor Smith said the Council had a strong record in job creation, for example, working with J Sainsbury on the new Colchester Superstore. Councillor Smith said when considering job creation it had to be in context with the position nationally, where manufacturing accounts for only 10% of national gross domestic product (GDP), with banking now accounting for 9% of GDP. Colchester now employed twice the national average of people in 'creative' industries, and this was an important element of the Council's strategic approach reflected in the SP, e.g. supporting firstsite and the new business incubation centre at Severalls. Sadly, the days of producing manufacturing jobs have gone and the Council are looking to new initiatives to create jobs in Colchester for Colchester people.

In response to Councillor Willetts, Councillor Smith said if the Panel so wished, a report to the Panel on Job Creation, the strategy and where the Council fits in with this work could be presented to the Panel in 2012.

### **Presentation**

Councillor Anne Turrell, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy and Performance and Mrs. Ann Hedges, Executive Director, attended the meeting for this item, a review of the Strategic Plan 2012-15.

Mrs. Hedges introduced the report, explaining the Strategic Plan sets the framework for the Council's three-year Medium Term Financial Forecast and its Capital Programme, and both the Plan and the Budget will be debated at the same full Council meeting in February 2012. Mrs. Hedges welcomed comments from the Panel on the content of the SP.

Councillor Turrell said the SP had been changed from the previous plan, to provide wording in Plain English, a 'puzzle' format that provided interlinking with partnership working and the delivery of high quality, accessible services.

## **Discussions**

Councillor Willetts doubted the statistical significance of the public consultation, with 243 responses representing a 0.13% / 0.32% return from borough residents / households respectively, saying it was hard to accept this work was useful given there was no assurance it was representative of the views of local people. Councillor Willetts said more information stored in the Council's data-bases should be used to get a better summary and more accurate steer on the aspirations of local people. Councillor Willetts later stated this was not a criticism but merely that a greater depth of results accumulated over the years would provide more meaningful information. Councillor Turrell said the Council undertakes many consultations every year and recognising this information and the need to demonstrate value for money, this information and that from the consultation for the Strategic Plan and the Budget Strategy for 2012/13 had been combined. Councillor Turrell said the main piece of consultation has been a survey, available on line and in hard copy, and a press release that was sent to all local media and a number of key organisations including Parish Councils. Councillor Turrell said she would be happy to arrange for all the responses to be provided to Panel members on request. Mrs. Hedges responded to Councillor Frame later in the discussions saying to undertake a consultation that included organising meetings to speak directly to focus groups and hard to reach communities would be very expensive work, only to ensure the Council has engaged with a small cross section of the community, and would not be considered value for money. Focus groups are consulted for more specific areas of work but not for the broader SP. Accepting this was a very important document, Mrs. Hedges said a lot of consultation evidence had been fed into the SP and the issues raised in the survey reinforced previous knowledge.

Whilst Councillor G. Oxford believed the new SP was visually a great improvement, he was concerned about the effects of the Localism Bill on the aspirations. Councillor Turrell said the Council would need to listen and respond accordingly, that a balance was needed on how we might deliver the services beyond the vision.

Councillor Cope commented that future graphical presentations of survey data would be better represented through histograms rather than pie charts.

In response to Councillor Scott-Boutell who felt the aspirations and direct services listed needed to be more specific, and Councillor Quince who felt the SP spelt out broad aims but generally was too woolly, Councillor Turrell and Mrs. Hedges said it was easier to generalise with the SP, given that more specific detailed information within the Action Plan would underpin the aspirations and provide a way to judge the performance of the SP. Councillor T. Higgins said these criticisms were similar to those mentioned with the draft 2009-12 SP. Councillor Higgins believed the SP needed to educate local people on the work of the Council and what the Council can share with partners, to show transparency and something simple enough for the public to understand and note.

In regards to future consultation Councillor T. Higgins said the Council would need to consider other forms of engagement, to think outside the box e.g. tweets and aps. In regards to the new SP Councillor Higgins it would be nice if less Council jargon and more plain english was used, and more contact details given than just the website.

Mrs. Hedges thanked Panel Members for their comments and the useful points made, and would take away and consider. Mrs. Hedges said Mrs. Jo Parlett the new Communications Manager had a technical background, useful for future consultation communication and the Council will move forward on this note.

*RESOLVED* that the Panel considered and noted the draft Strategic Plan 2012-2015, prior to its consideration by the Cabinet on 25 January 2012 and adoption by the full Council on 22 February 2012.

## **27. Work Programme**

The Panel agreed to Mr. Judd's request for the item on the review of the Colchester Community Stadium Limited being rescheduled to the meeting on 20 March 2012.

Mr. Judd agreed to talk to officers with a view to adding a review to the February meeting on Job Enabling / Creation.

Mr. Judd confirmed to the Panel that the issues discussed earlier on air quality would form part of the work to be presented to the Panel in January in regards to the review of Public Transport in the Borough.

*RESOLVED* that the Panel considered and noted the Work Programme.