

# SCRUTINY PANEL

## 12 March 2024

*Present: -* Councillor Arnold, Councillor Laws (Chair),  
Councillor McCarthy, Councillor McLean,  
Councillor Rowe, Councillor Smalls, Councillor  
Willetts

*Substitutions: -* None

*Also present: -* Councillor King, Councillor Luxford Vaughan,  
Councillor Sommers

### **458. Have Your Say**

Martin Pugh addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1), to ask whether the Scrutiny Panel had investigated matters relating to a letter sent by Natural England, regarding Middlewick ranges and their inclusion in the Local Plan. Mr. Pugh first stated that the Council's Planning Team had dismissed the letter's importance, then argued that the letter could have changed the decision taken to include the land in the Local Plan. Mr Pugh alleged that there was a long list of procedures which had been overlooked or broken, and that he had expected a more substantive response from the Council to concerns that had previously been raised. Frustration was described that the Council was now following every procedure, which meant that it would take longer to act. Mr Pugh asked whether the independent ecology report had been truly independent.

The Chairman explained that the matter could not be considered by the Scrutiny Panel, as it related to a decision taken by Full Council, having followed the Local Plan process. Councillor King, Leader of the Council, stated that it was his understanding that the matters relating to the letter had been addressed, when previously raised by Alan Short, and offered to provide details if Mr Pugh wished to see them. Councillor Luxford-Vaughan, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Environment and Sustainability, stated that all letters had now been answered, and a new one had been circulated to elected members. Officer advice had been that the concerns as to the original Natural England letter not being included in the Regulation 18 consultation process was not an issue. The Portfolio Holder acknowledged that the ecological report produced was not the best example ever produced, and this had been taken onboard. The report had however gone to the Planning Inspector, with the process leading to more robust work being carried out upon it, with the Inspector passing the process as being sound. Section Two hearings had been extensive and extended. The Leader of the Council added that legal advice had been sought, and had stated that the process had not been unlawful. Due process had been followed

and additional robust protections added. The Leader asked Mr. Pugh to detail any specific regulations which he believed had been breached.

Terry Charles addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1), to accuse Full Council of bias and predetermination in its decision to declare a climate emergency [on 17 July 2019] and to ask whether the Scrutiny Panel would support a public debate on climate change. Mr Charles stated that the Leader of the Council had agreed to a public meeting, but that this had not yet been held. Mr Charles claimed that hundreds of thousands of people would demand change, and that only one side of the argument had been given.

The Chairman stated that he would be happy to request an item on net zero to be added to the Panel's work programme for the coming municipal year, should he be re-elected. The Panel could then make recommendations to Cabinet, but any decision would be down to Cabinet, as the Executive body of the Council.

The Leader stated that he had given Mr Charles and others time to discuss their requests in person, leaving it to the members of the public concerned to give their views as to how any public discussion could be structured. This had been offered, and the Leader recommended that the offer of Scrutiny Panel consideration be taken. Allegations of predetermination were refuted, with the Leader stating that Full Council made decisions for itself, and that this decision had been taken forward as best the Council had been able to do so.

Mr Brian Reece addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1), stating that three members of the public had met with the Leader of the Council in November 2023, to discuss a possible public meeting. Mr Reece accused the Council of inaction and attempting to ignore these members of the public, and offered two dates for a public meeting.

Then Chairman confirmed his wish to have a debate, but stated that members of the public could not just give arbitrary dates for this to take place, and that the Leader of the Council had confirmed that his door was open for discussions on this. The Chairman further suggested that there was still time for people to stand as candidates in the upcoming elections to the Council. The Leader explained that he needed Mr Reece to give his sense as to the structure of any public meeting, and promised to respond to any message sent to him on this subject. Members of the Panel requested that Panel members be copied in to any response sent by the Leader to emails on this subject.

#### **459. Local Highways Panel**

Apologies had been received from Councillor Sue Lissimore, Chair of the Local Highways Panel, and Jane Thompson, Transport and Sustainability Joint Lead. Both had intended to be present, but were unable to attend due to illness.

Councillor David King, Leader of the Council, explained that the report looked at the Council's relationship with Essex Highways. Responsibility for highways matters lay with Essex County Council, so questions could be framed as to how the City Council approached the Local Highways Panel, with changes underway regarding how

highways work is carried out. It was expected that the ramifications for the Local Highways Panel [LHP] would be seen later in March 2024. The Council had limited influence, but the report presented that it was doing what it could do.

Matthew Brown, Economic Regeneration Manager, explained that the LHP looked at small-scale capital infrastructure projects, such as bus stops, cycle paths, and tackling local hotspots. The Council did not contribute funding since 2018-19, but did influence works via the LHP.

A Panel member noted the share of Council tax which went to Essex County Council [ECC], and asked whether devolution of highways maintenance to the City Council be workable. The Leader stated that ECC accepted the arguments in favour of devolution, but the question was how to carry out devolution in a practical way. The redevelopment of St. Nicholas Square was a good example of collaborative work with ECC. The Leader asked the Panel to consider what competencies the Council could add to the relevant team to help the Council achieve works in a simpler way, with a possible way forward for the Council to have an arrangement to do some highways work within Colchester. Lindsay Barker, Deputy Chief Executive, noted that Essex devolution was currently on hold, but it was hoped that it would be returned unto. Conversations continued across North Essex councils, seeking greater decision making in the area. Councils were making the most of current arrangements to influence and have an effect on decision making, seeing successes.

A Panel member asked why the budget for LHPs had been cut from £4m to £2m, with the Colchester LHP budget dropping from £0.5m to £0.25m. The Deputy Chief Executive explained that ECC had the same budget pressures as the Council, but with around 80% of their budget going into adult social care or into caring for SEND [Special educational needs and disabilities] children. ECC were seeking all possible ways to save money. The Council had a good record of gaining highways funding, but needed to be clear in its prioritisations. The Leader explained that there was an agreement in principle, between the Council and ECC, on a capital programme for Colchester centre in the Summer.

A Panel member raised concern that there might be a disconnect between the Council's Planning Team, and ECC Highways, where new housing developments were not matched by transport infrastructure improvements.

The Economic Regeneration Manager clarified that Colchester, Chelmsford and Basildon together received 12.5% of the overall Essex budget for LHPs. A Panel member asked if the Council could contribute funding to the LHP. The Deputy Chief Executive cautioned that this would generate difficult questions as to why the Council would be funding a function of the County Council. Another Panel member suggested that the Panel should recommend that Cabinet reinstitutes its £100k per year funding of the LHP, and that resource should be found for this. This was compared to the £7.7m agreed in the 2024-25 Budget for highways spending by the Council, on a specific local project. The Panel member suggested that this work be cancelled and the money used elsewhere.

The Deputy Chief Executive highlighted that the Council had just passed a Budget which would require a restructure, under very challenging circumstances. The £7.7m spending allocated to highways work around the Northern Gateway site was to be an investment in access to the biggest of the Council's assets. A Panel member countered with a request for priority to instead be given to matters of concern to residents, such as to minimise damage to vehicles from poorly maintained roads.

Other Panel members pointed out that ECC received a far greater share of Council Tax than the City Council received, for providing different services, which gave rise to caution as to whether the Council should provide funding for an ECC function. An alternative suggestion was made, that it would be preferable for ECC to restore its funding of LHPs to the previous level, of £0.5m

The Panel considered possible issues regarding how the LHP explained its work, to show the public what it was doing. A Panel member argued that the LHP's reputation did not engender confidence in it and whether it performed effectively. The Deputy Chief Executive noted that the request for better communication of the LHP's work could be passed on to the Chair of the LHP. The Chairman suggested that the Chair of the LHP could be asked to provide more information on its working, and on how this could be advertised. Owen Howell, Democratic Services Officer, noted that the Panel had no mechanism to make formal recommendations directly to the Local Highways Panel. The Chairman therefore pledged to write to Councillor Lissimore to make an informal request for more information on the LHP's work to be communicated, both to the Panel and to the public.

*RECOMMENDED* that CABINET consider authorising Council funding to be provided to the Local Highways Panel, as had previously been done up to 2018-19.

#### **460. Annual review of Town Deal programme**

A member of the Panel criticised the lack of detail given on the governance and monitoring of progress within the Town Deal, and raised concern that the report presented did not include views from the We Are Colchester Partnership [WACP]. Lindsay Barker, Deputy Chief Executive, informed the Panel that all minutes and records from meetings of the Town Deal [We Are Colchester] Board were published. The Council was the accountable body, which was why it conducted annual scrutiny of the partnership's work, including information on spending and risk management. Councillor David King, Leader of the Council, explained that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities [DLUHC] requirements for funding bids included the need for an independent body and board in order for bids to be eligible. Simon Blaxill, Board Chair, was in attendance to address any questions relating to the Board. The Deputy Chief Executive added that the Council was under contract to deliver projects, in addition to being the accountable body.

The Chair noted that some places receiving Town Deal funding had delayed their projects, voicing his approval that significant delays had not been seen in Colchester, and that this funding could be used to leverage further funding.

Matt Sterling, Head of Economic Growth, gave an overview of the projects in the Town Deal, and receiving levelling up funding and funds from partners. Designs had

now been submitted for the multi-agency hub within the Heart of Greenstead Project. The County Council [ECC] was bringing in funding of £200k-£300k for a walkability pilot. Schemes in the City centre included some refurbishment of heritage assets and some improvements to the public realm. This included the renovation of St Nicholas Square. The Holy Trinity Square design plan had been approved by Planning Committee in February 2024. Holy Trinity Church was to be brought into use as a community hub, with the One Colchester Partnership, and managed by Community 360, with total cost of around £2.8m and heritage lottery funding sought to meet the total required. The County Hospital scheme included funding to boost public realm and open up the amenity for all members of the public. Heritage lottery finding had been gained for the Jumbo area, enabling much progress towards opening this up for better use.

Youth facilities, at the Town House, Highwoods and Stanway Youth Centres were addressed, with a contractor appointed to start work at Highwoods this month, whilst work at the Town House was scheduled to commence in May 2024 and at Stanway Youth Centre in July 2024.

Physical connectivity work between the City Centre and the East, including Greenstead, had seen designs progress, including traffic regulation orders, key dates set, and finances laid out.

Digital connectivity included the Digital Work Hub on Queen Street, where the bus depot had been demolished and planning permission obtained. Inflation of costs had been addressed, with increased costs now met. Workers had been onsite since January and progress made. The Digital Skills Hub at Wilson Marriage Centre had been completed and launched. 5G sites in the city centre were described, where more private investment was being sought. This was being overseen by Colchester Amphora Trading Limited [CATL] A tender exercise had been carried out, with due diligence now being undertaken and outcomes expected soon.

Cost inflation was a difficulty for all, nationwide, and a key risk. Projects also needed to be finished by 2026, as this was a condition set by Government on the funding grant. Content was on track, but overspend and overruns remained key risks. All projects' costs were shown, alongside funding to date and leveraged funds that had been achieved. Two projects were having their designs examined, to ensure that they remained on budget. All others had the necessary budgets available, even after costs had experienced inflation. 2024 would be a year of delivery, with continuing with public engagement and coordinating schemes to minimise disruption. The most recent social media engagement on the Town Deal had generated 80k impressions.

Simon Blaxill, Chair of the WACP Board, praised the work of officers and described the work as being well-coordinated. The work of the Board was explained, with the Board a mandatory requirement for receiving the funding from Government. The Council had therefore convened the Board, and was the accountable body. The Board had developed and agreed projects, resources and engagement with stakeholders. The Board had continued as governing body, in partnership with DLUHC, and as a consultee group on emerging opportunities. Vision, checking and challenge were key elements of the Board's duties, identifying gaps and how to address them. The Board members did not receive remuneration for their work.

Officers were asked to explain the extent to which there was a risk that the Council would lose money, if not all projects were completed, or projects not completed fully. The Deputy Chief Executive clarified that the risk would be potentially having to give funding back, if projects were not to be completed. The Council was not exposed to any additional costs, and was able to move money between projects, if this became necessary.

#### **461. Celebrating Our City Status**

Lucie Breadman, Strategic Director, introduced the item and gave apologies for Sam Good, Chief Executive Officer of the Colchester Business Improvement District [BID], who had intended to attend. Focus had been on the Year of Celebration and collaborative marketing, led by the BID, as well as rural and youth involvement. This had given a platform for a new approach, working with partners and utilising Colchester's strengths. Around 40 events had been held under the City Status branding, which had been taken up by a number of partners. Highlights had included the Royal visit, and the gladiator exhibition, which was to go on national tour in the next year.

The Mercury Theatre had asked young people what they thought of the City. Concerns regarding access, transport and the local offer were raised. A group led by the BID had been working on how to present Colchester to the wider UK audience.

Councillor King, Leader of the Council, highlighted the economic, social, and reputational effects of city status. The aims and objectives for communications and engagement, both internal and external, were noted, giving expectations for the Council and its partners. This included judging how well the Council had increased Colchester's profile, putting the City in the right place to engage with businesses and others. Anecdotal evidence indicated the approach was working.

Elodie Gilbert, Head of Creative Engagement at The Mercury Theatre, described the excitement around city status, and the opportunities it entailed. Fun and creative ways to engage with young people and their parents had been sought. Transport links to the City centre had seen improvements, and feeling safe was a priority that had been raised, across the city centre and including in nightlife. Events had been started to cater for younger clienteles, including a holiday club and other activities. The Mercury had worked with the Youth Service at the Town House, and this work was being broadened to other areas.

Panel members asked what benefits had been seen, and how these could be measured and used as the foundations for further work and to attract new businesses. Officers were asked to explain how the importance and benefits of city status could be communicated. The Leader of the Council admitted that it was challenging to quantify the effects of city status. The Council would track investment levels in the area and the ways in which Colchester was seen. Impact had to be shown to be real. Impacts included a richer relationship with the Garrison, a deeper relationship with the University, and the effect on the Town Deal projects and levelling up funding.

The Strategic Director informed the Panel that there were indications that more people were now travelling to Colchester for a 'city break', but cautioned that data on tourism levels was subject to significant lag. Two major hotel chains were interested in coming to Colchester, and young people wanted to come to the City for social activities. A Panel member pointed out that there was rural interest in theatre and cultural activities too.

A Panel member stated that Colchester had a level of vacant commercial units which was below the regional and national levels, and asked for a forecast on the vacancy rate expected in 2024-25. It was suggested that the Council's successful social media engagements should be used to show that Colchester compared favourably to other places, regarding retail offer and filling commercial units. Another member agreed that the rebranding of Colchester was going well, but noted the challenge to the Council of meeting people's expectations for city status, but with tight finances. The Panel discussed public expectations, with a view given that improved expectations were a good thing, showing the importance of city status and increasing interest in the area. A brief discussion was had on what the best name for the City Council would be. Many residents still did not see the benefits of city status, and the need to show them was raised. The Strategic Director described the Year of Celebration as being about pride in, and celebration of, Colchester across the whole area. Large-scale regeneration was being carried out. This would cause disruption, but would lead to overall improvements. Colchester seemed more in the news now, and was winning awards.

A member of the Panel complained that their home village had received no funding from the Town Deal, but had then been excluded from the rural prosperity fund, as it was within the Town Deal area. The argument was made that Council officers were already working on improving the local economy and tourism, so gaining city status had not done much to increase this work. The Panel member stated that he had seen no acceleration in improvements and urged an evaluation of the effects of city status, rather than work done through the Town Deal, levelling up funding or Rural Prosperity Fund, accepting that it was difficult to evaluate the effects of these separately. The Leader of the Council accepted the challenge, but argued the effects included how people felt, and not just statistics. The Leader was asked for data to compare the uplift in Colchester tourism to the changes in tourism in other parts of the area, to see if there were any differences.

#### **462. Portfolio Holder Briefing [Planning, Environment and Sustainability]**

Councillor Luxford-Vaughan, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Environment and Sustainability, gave an overview of work within her remit, which included planning issues, consultations and responding to these on behalf of the Council. The Portfolio Holder held an overview of the North Station Infrastructure Project [NSIP], and was given sight of documentation on the City Centre Masterplan. A dedicated officer and extra funding were in place to work on the pylon network, as part of a national scheme.

The Planning Team had met and passed key performance indicator targets for decision-making. Ways to further improve were being considered. Colchester was twelfth out of around 300 local authorities for statutory notices served. Although the

Team was small, it performed above its size. An outline of the approach to Section 106 contributions was given, for developments valued at over £250k. £100k had been received from DLUHC for staffing. This allowed for staffing of the NSIP, an Ecology/Conservation Officer, and assisted the Building Control Team. Building Control had had a difficult year, with a small team of two, rather than the seven it should have been. More officers were now being recruited. Building safety was complying with the latest regulations.

Regarding the Tendring Borders Garden Community [TBGC], the approach taken was to hold out for improved infrastructure and delivery of the infrastructure which had been promised.

Partnership work for accessing grants included energy saving measures, and a grant to change the swimming pool's air conditioning, which would produce savings. A drop in water treatment costs at Leisure World had also been achieved. A £38k grant had been won for the Natural History Museum.

Bike parking was covered, along with three presentations at conferences, showing the successes of the E-Cargo bike scheme.

Other work within the Portfolio included carbon literacy training, 'Fixing the Link' work, 12k miles clocked up by EV clubs, and a reduction in the number of areas subject to poor air quality special measures.

The issues being raised around Middlewick ranges were outlined. The Local Plan policy was as robust as possible, and there would need to be a master-planning process laid out before any major development could submit plans to the Planning Committee. Regarding requests for a focussed review on this part of the Local Plan, the Portfolio Holder explained that the site was large and complicated, and the implications for other sites would need to also be examined. This meant that there would be no savings from pursuing this action, rather than examining it in the current Local Plan Review itself. Timelines were being prepared and would go forward, with the Portfolio Holder's view being that a focus review would not be appropriate. An independent ecological assessment of the site had been requested, and the Portfolio Holder described work with Natural England and the Natural History Museum to set the brief. This had now been commissioned.

The 'Call for sites' was described, and it was clarified that there had been no calls to increase potential residential development at Middlewick; there had only been proposals for improving green infrastructure in that area. The Strategic Land Availability Assessment methodology was covered. Stage one was where inappropriate sites could be removed, then a RAG [Red/Amber/Green] rating assigned to the remaining sites, judged via a range of factors. The document would then go to review. Officers were available to discuss the document with interested parties, such as parish councils; this only needed to be requested.

The Chairman praised the work done on pylons by James Ryan, Planning Manager (South), working with parish councils and others. The Panel discussed the briefing content, asking if the planned infrastructure audit would work with the timeline of the 'Call for sites', with some mention of a perceived lack of infrastructure in the area.



The Portfolio Holder was also asked what the cancellation of the A120 upgrade would mean for housing in the West, and whether the cycling needs of the whole Colchester area were being considered, not just those in the East. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the infrastructure audit was accounted for in the 2024-25 Budget. A brief needed to be set, but this would remain on the agenda. The North Essex Authorities' Shared Strategic Section 1 Plan laid out needed infrastructure, and the Portfolio Holder ventured that expected new housing could not be built without the expected improvements to the A120. This was also a concern regarding the effect it would have on the planned garden community. This would need to be raised with Essex County Council [ECC]. On cycle lanes, the Portfolio Holder noted that some were controversial, due partly to being underused, and there were significant gaps between cycle lanes. Work was ongoing, with communities, to identify gaps and where people wanted these fixed, so this could be filtered into the infrastructure audit. Central funding would be needed in order for necessary works to be funded. Work would be done and then included in the Infrastructure Plans.

A Panel member asked questions as to how infrastructure, including cycle lanes, had been decided in the past. The Portfolio Holder could not comment on how this was done before her time, but many projects had come directly from ECC, and there were grants available. ECC asked for views as to where the most effective places for spending would be. Examples were given of identifying and addressing infrastructure gaps.

The Portfolio Holder was asked what would be in the content of the Masterplan for Middlewick, and how the Council could reassure people concerned about Middlewick. A Panel member opined that the content of the ecological report was now more widely known, stating that the Essex Wildlife Trust had changed its position, and asking if Middlewick could be removed from the Local Plan, potentially to be designated an SSSI [Site of Specific Scientific Interest]. The Portfolio Holder argued that the Masterplan had to happen before any planning application could be considered. The ecology report conducted at the time had said that there was nothing to see, but experts did attend Section Two hearings, putting forward claims about the site. The Council remained restricted by central government diktats on ecology and biodiversity, but it was noted that the Planning Inspector made the policy on this far more stringent. Once other parts of the review were carried out, officers would draft proposals to be submitted for decision. The Council could make recommendations, but the Planning Inspector would make the decisions. The Portfolio Holder gave the view that it would be hard for a planning application on this site to be policy compliant.

Questions were asked as to whether removing Middlewick from the Local Plan would leave it open to speculative development proposals, and whether it could be designated as a nature reserve. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that there was a national presumption in favour of developments, unless covered by the Local Plan to prevent this. Being within the Local Plan afforded a measure of protection regarding numbers of new properties. An SSSI or country park would still be open to speculative development if not in the Local Plan.

A Panel member raised concerns about the 'Call for sites', and asked how Section 106 contributions would be used transparently to mitigate the effects of new housing,

how they would be decided, and how residents could be involved more in these decisions. A request was made for greater transparency from officers regarding Section 106 contribution setting. The Portfolio Holder explained the difficulties of parish councils and residents in providing views on planning applications and Section 106 decisions, with the processes dictated by central government.

The Portfolio Holder was questioned about the monitoring of the Climate Change Action Plan, with a Panel member complaining that outstanding issues were continually ducked, such as the need to move to a fleet of electric waste collection vehicles. Given that Council had declared a climate emergency, the view was given that the Council would need to spend to address this emergency. The Portfolio Holder was asked to give a view as to the cost of continuing as normal, and as to what money she thought the Council should spend to address the climate emergency. The Portfolio Holder gave her view that it was very important to act, and that she was wanting to know if the actions underway were the correct things to do. This subject was added to the portfolio in May, so the Portfolio Holder did not yet know who was in overall charge. A comment was made from the Panel to urge clarity regarding who was leading and deciding on actions and spending. Councillor Natalie Sommers, Portfolio Holder for Communities, noted that the Environment and Sustainability Panel had looked at new fleet costs for different options, including EVs and Hydrogen vehicles. Issues were found with converting to an EV fleet, and a new substation may need to be built to manage power requirements. A written response was requested by a Panel member on the question as to how decision making on the climate emergency was being carried out. The Portfolio Holder for Planning, Environment and Sustainability noted that an email on the Climate Change Action Plan had been forwarded to elected members.

#### **463. Portfolio Holder Briefing [Communities]**

Councillor Natalie Sommers, Portfolio Holder for Communities, provided an overview of her remit and thanked officers for their work. Councillor Sommers gave a list of main points, including the hosting of the Knife Angel, which was to highlight the harm of knife crime and violence, seeing over 50k visitors and 642 conversations with volunteers. 669 students had attended the related workshops. Plays on the subject were written, and other activities held over the month on which it was on display. A Panel member asked if the cost of the Knife Angel would be better spent on enforcement. The Portfolio Holder gave the benefits of the project, and believed that the only cost to the Council had been for transporting it and installing it. The Portfolio Holder pledged to provide an answer on this.

Multi-agency action days had been held on North Station Road, and the Police had appointed an additional sergeant and five constables to the City Centre Policing Team, as part of an increase in Police numbers across the area. There had been fewer traveller incursions in the Summer of 2023, down from a previous high point. Most incursions were quickly cleared, some being handled on the same day they were reported. A new safeguarding officers was appointed in June 2023, working with partner organisations to improve safeguarding. 'Ride: London' was to return to Colchester on 24 May. A co-ordinated activation event was held, with a big screen and stalls for health and wellbeing subjects. 195 bikes had been given away, paid for by a dedicated grant for public health funding.

Dog collecting and pest control services were generating income and increasing in efficiency. Pest control services were already on course to meet its need to generate income. The price of bedbug treatments had been capped. The ban on XL Bully dogs meant that the Council had to seek rehoming of dogs where the owners could not comply with new regulations or abandoned their dogs.

Complaint statistics were given, alongside information on the Council's support services. The Finance and Employment Support team worked to help residents claim hundreds of thousands in benefits to which they were entitled. This helped to ease pressure on services and housing demand.

A Food safety audit had been carried out in 2023, with work ongoing to clear the backlog caused by the pandemic, which had halted inspections. Proactive enforcement was used for lower risk premises. The Licensing Enforcement Policy had been streamlined and simplified. The same was planned for the Taxi Policy. CCTV in taxis had been confirmed as a local matter by central government. There would be cost implications for the Council, relating to data management, if CCTV was insisted upon.

A new Bereavement Service Manager had been appointed, and enhanced memorial options available. An issue had been discovered over some ashes being left at the Crematorium for decades, in some cases. A stricter process was now in place, reducing the ashes held by over 50%. The effects of the pandemic, and the refurbishment of Wheeley Crematorium were described, with increased demand now easing back to normal levels. Fees and charges had been reset, and cremation options altered to help cater for all budgets. Health and wellbeing matters were being tackled, and stigma regarding dying and talking about death was being addressed, seeking to normalise the subject. The Cemetery had been extended in 2016, with recent trends seeing continued increase in cremations compared to burial. Older parts of the Cemetery were being audited to identify space available for use. It was estimated that the site had over twenty years of use for burials remaining.

Policy Panel had reviewed the Council's Equality and Diversity Policy, and an inclusion group had been set up. Work was now underway on assessing what was needed to meet the National Equality and Diversity Framework requirements.

The Portfolio Holder was asked whether the Council provided governance advice and support to its partner organisations in the voluntary and charitable sector. Michelle Tarbun, Head of Health Partnerships & Wellbeing, clarified that the Council did not offer advice, but that there were third sector organisations specialised in providing governance advice or training. The Portfolio Holder added that the option of engaging a specialist organisation, to help provide governance advice to charitable sector partners, was being examined as one of the options under consideration in light of recent matters coming to light. Advice was being given by a range of partners regarding this subject. This was still currently underway.

The Portfolio Holder was asked about statutory guidance on safety, and whether the Council ensured that the requirements were included in every contract. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the Council was looking to do similar on this with charities

receiving funding, in the same fashion as funding agreement requirements were set out for the arts organisations receiving funding from the Council. The Head of Health Partnerships & Wellbeing explained that there were many channels for groups to receive funding via the Council, with four main channels for voluntary and welfare work. Funding agreements included the requirements from regulations, such as reporting back on how funds were used. A Panel member underlined the Scrutiny Panel's duty to examine the use of funding. The Panel discussed the assurances provided by the Portfolio Holder, and these were bolstered by the reporting to Scrutiny Panel which was due to take place on specific third sector partners in the future.

The Panel extended its thanks to Councillors Sommers and Luxford-Vaughan for attending and briefing the Panel on their work.

#### **464. Annual Scrutiny Report 2023-24**

*RECOMMENDED* to FULL COUNCIL that the Annual Scrutiny Report 2023-24 be approved.