

POLICY REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL

20 SEPTEMBER 2010

Present :- Councillor Nigel Offen (Chairman)
Councillors Nigel Chapman, Mike Hardy, Michael Lilley,
Lesley Scott-Boutell and Jill Tod

Substitute Member :- Councillor Bill Frame for Councillor Margaret Fisher

Also in Attendance :- Councillor Lyn Barton
Councillor Henry Spyvee
Councillor Dennis Willetts

10. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 September 2010 were confirmed as a correct record, subject to the inclusion of 'in his capacity as Chairman of the Task and Finish Group' after the words 'Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, Culture and Tourism in the resolution to minute no 8.

11. Historic Town Centre Improvements

Mr Nick Chilvers addressed the Panel, pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1). He acknowledged the difficulties associated with planning transportation needs for the future, especially given Colchester's physical geography and existing road junction network. He expressed concern regarding the reputation of the town centre as a shopping destination and about the traffic problems associated with Cowdray Avenue especially leading up to and at rush hour. He considered that reductions in congestion would only be achieved through aggressive 'anti-car' measures which, in turn, would not prove helpful in attracting shoppers to the town. He questioned whether it would be possible to utilise the Brook Street area to improve access between St Botolph's and Greenstead, whether there were future proposals to create a bus stop at the top of Queen Street and what form the planned town centre consultation process would take, in terms of the questions to be asked and amount of profile to be given to it.

Councillor Willetts attended and, with the consent of the Chairman addressed the Panel speaking in relation to the policy issues associated with the town centre. He proposed different principles be adopted to ensure Colchester retained its status in the country. He did not agree that the quick wins highlighted in the officer's report were of sufficient merit. He felt that unique solutions were needed to deliver a modern town centre within the town's existing historic context. He concentrated on two issues specifically – he considered the loss of the bus station to be wasteful and that more needed to be done to assist people to travel by bus into the town centre and he was of the firm view that the bus link from the Park and Ride site into the town centre needed to be a quick journey utilising North Hill and the two lanes of Head Street with the High street pedestrianised. He suggested that the intended use of the funds available needed to be reviewed without delay in order to demonstrate to Essex County Council that this

Council is committed to Park and Ride, a new bus station, the pedestrianisation of the High Street and a fast bus route into the town centre.

Councillor Spyvee attended and, with the consent of the Chairman addressed the Panel speaking in support of the consultation exercise and the need to ensure that the opinions of the people who are in the town centre all the time, the local residents, are taken into account. He also wished to ensure that Councillors are given the opportunity to state their views. He was of the view that the town centre was a very different place at different times of the day and night and the local retail and service businesses tended to take account of the town centre during the hours the hours of 9am to 5.30pm only.

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Strategic Policy and Regeneration inviting the members to review progress with the Better Town Centre Programme.

Howard Davies, Town Centre Project Manager, presented a scene setting paper to the members of the Panel explaining that conclusions had yet to be reached on the Programme as the outcome of a public consultation exercise to be undertaken in the Autumn was awaited.

Also in attendance to assist the Panel in its discussions was Alan Lindsay, Essex County Council's Acting Principal Transportation Planner and Councillor Barton, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Sustainability who explained that Department of Communities and Local Government funding of £550,000 had been secured for the current financial year through the Haven Gateway Partnership to address some of the issues relating to traffic. Councillor Barton went on to express the view that complete pedestrianisation would not work in Colchester. It had been hoped that more funding may be forthcoming from Essex County Council but this was now on hold pending the outcome of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010. She had, however, received assurances that the County Council would be arranging for an application to be made for European funding which would constitute Phase 4 of the Improvements.

Since last reporting to the Panel much work has been undertaken with bus operators and Hackney carriage representatives to understand what needed to be in place to reduce unnecessary traffic in the Town Centre core and what provision would need to be made following the formal closure of the temporary bus station in Queen Street in December 2012.

An engagement exercise with the public had been carried out in March 2010 providing information on the 9 themes of the Programme, one of which related to "getting around in Colchester." This theme focused on emerging ideas for reducing traffic in the town centre, and improvements to public transport to increase efficiency and reliability.

In addition various improvement projects have now been completed:

- Haven Gateway funds were used to repair and finish the Essex and Suffolk Fire Office colonnade;
- Works in the St Peter's churchyard were carried out, following which the church was adopted by the Garrison as its Town Centre Church;

- Public realm improvements to the Priory grounds to improve accessible links from St Julian Grove, Britannia car park and Priory Street and work on the trees and shrubs to improve light and security within the Priory;

A Town Centre Steering Group had also been formed which encompassed representatives from service groups within Colchester Borough Council such as Strategic Policy, Planning, Street Services and Life Opportunities as well as Haven Gateway Partnership and Essex County Council.

Final work was being undertaken by the Traffic and Transport Project team which would be fed through to the Steering Group prior to the public consultation and would include an update of the Public Realm Strategy concurring with current Government expectations around street clutter in Town Centres.

It was anticipated that the consultation would have commenced by the end of October 2010 and measures would be put in place to raise public awareness about its existence. The outcomes of the consultation would be used to identify the way forward for the Programme whilst decisions regarding actual works to be undertaken would need to be made in the early new year for implementation by the end of March 2011.

The Panel discussed the issues raised in the presentation at length and gave particular consideration to the following issues:-

- In what ways the £550,000 funding would be allocated and whether there was any difficulty in identifying projects which could be completed in the time available;
- What was the current situation regarding funding streams from Essex County Council;
- Which areas would be addressed in the context of the public consultation;
- Whether any account had or would be taken to obtain opinions from traditionally hard to reach groups and younger people;
- Suggestions regarding the use of Sixth Form Colleges and the Colchester Youth Council in order to engage with younger people;
- Whether Essex County Council was working with the Borough Council to obtain funds from Europe and what were the most likely successful sources of funds;
- Concern regarding the Council's ability to deliver actual improvements given the level of funding required for ambitious and imaginative projects;
- A suggestion that the Council considered the appointment of a Councillor to act as a Bus Champion which may assist with the need to negotiate with a number of different transport operators;
- The importance of buses running to time and being able to travel through the town as well as around it;
- The need for policy documents such as that produced on the Public Realm to be made more accessible for the public.

Ian Vipond, Executive Director explained to the Panel the need to acknowledge that there would be reduced levels of public funding available in the forthcoming few years but that there were other examples of improvements to public areas, such as that undertaken in Red Lion Walk, which were privately funded projects and had brought very significant investment into the town. He felt it was important to acknowledge the

Council's role in facilitating investment whereby the creation of an ambition for the town to address the needs identified as a result of undertaking good quality consultation could be a significant contribution to delivering the improvements desired.

RESOLVED that the following issues be noted:-

- (i) Progress on the Better Town Centre Programme;
- (ii) Progress on the town centre traffic and transport study element Historic Town Centre Improvements work, on the understanding that further detail would be available in the next stage consultation process;
- (iii) Feedback from the Better Town Centre public engagement event earlier this year.

12. Work Programme 2010/11

The Panel considered a report from the Head of Corporate Management setting out the current situation regarding the Panel's work programme for 2010/11.

The outcome of discussions between this Panel's Chairman and the Chairman of the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Panel regarding the Olympics 2012 report was still awaited and confirmation had been received to include consideration of the Council's Policy on Allotments within the work programme for the meeting in November 2010.

RESOLVED that the current situation regarding work programme for 2010/11 be noted.