

Policy Panel

Wednesday, 27 September 2023

Attendees: Councillor Jocelyn Law, Councillor Sue Lissimore, Councillor Sam McCarthy, Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell, Councillor Rhys Smithson, Councillor Julie Young
Apologies: Councillor Kevin Bentley
Substitutes: Councillor Sara Naylor (for Councillor Kevin Bentley)

81 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 2 August 2023 be approved as a correct record.

82 City Centre Marketing & Inward Investment

The Panel decided to consider this item alongside the agenda item on ‘Future of retail vision’, receiving both presentations back-to-back, followed by a single discussion session to cover both items.

Sam Good, Manager of the Colchester Business Improvement District [BID], gave a presentation which included key details from the recent report produced by Colchester’s City Status Place Marketing Task and Finish Group. Colchester was described as needing a joined-up approach to encourage cross-sector inward investment, including in tourism and the cultural sector. It was estimated that only between a quarter and a half of inward investment was able to be measured, with growth in income, jobs and opportunities being sought. Local Enterprise Partnerships [LEPs], Essex County Council [ECC], the North Essex Economic Board [NEEB], Freeport East, the Council and anchor organisations were all involved. Central Government was named as a partner, although it was noted that there was an absence of policy from the current Government.

Inward investment was defined and explained, alongside the work of the City Centre’s Task and Finish Group, its priorities, work and opportunities.

Tech investment included increasing investment and productivity with partners, including agri-tech research at the University of Essex, and innovations at commercial partners such as Wilkin and Sons. Visibility was an ongoing issue, as much activity was carried out without being seen by the public, with a key need identified for improvements to be made to increasing visibility of actions, explaining to and educating residents in the ongoing work of different partners.

The offer made to potential investors was explained, including what was being done to show what made Colchester distinctive and an attractive investment opportunity. The process to craft strategy for inward investment was explained, including why it was not possible to have only a single strategy, due to different organisations conducting work at different levels. A coordinated necessary approach was however taken towards all inward investment opportunities and enquiries.

Karen Turnbull, Economic Strategy Specialist, emphasised the importance of networks, including having reach and contacts within all relevant sectors. The example was given of SPACE Studios, which had set up a new site on Queen Street. Other examples were outlined, such as a Care Tech project (important given projections of increasing care needs and opportunities), the delivery of ultra-fast broadband, with the digital strategy including a £50m partnership with VX Fibre, and 'destination development' with six new hotels increasing local hotel capacity. The vision was set for Colchester to be a 'smart' city and take advantage of technological opportunities. The City's business-focussed website was being worked upon and improved, and the Government's approach and funding opportunities would be observed, including in the area of local government devolution, with testing to be carried out to see how far the 'smart city' approach could be adopted.

The Panel were told that the laying out of ambitions and project pipelines for Colchester meant that the Council and its partners could react quickly as funding streams became available for bids to be submitted, such as from the Levelling Up Fund [LUF]. It was necessary to react quickly in order to bid successfully. A key partner in this was 'We Are Colchester', which provided governance and oversight to the Town Deal projects. Examples of Government funding in the UK were given, such as the £500m funding for Tata Jaguar Land Rover, to support the running of a 'gigafactory'.

In answer to questions, the BID Manager explained that work on attracting inward investment was getting Colchester ready for approaches, and helping to gather data as to what residents wanted. An example was the Shop Front Improvement Grant, which came from a BID application in 2020, and was a joint fund with LUF and BID funding. Several premises were going through the planning process, with work completed on Red Lion Walk and underway for Claydons. This funding would be used to seek further leveraged funding.

The BID Manager gave a presentation on 'Future of retail vision', explaining that a vision and strategies were in place, so the relevant partner organisation/s could bid immediately, as funding pots became available. Research carried out in 2022 investigated the changes needed to support retail and included reviews of national trends and future trend expectations. The BID's ambition was stated and explained: 'To be a City Centre where retailers of all shapes and sizes can develop and thrive in a collaborative, engaging, mixed use environment, with people and business firmly at its heart; fit for now and fit for the future.'

The organisation's vision had come from a raft of research and collected data, and the BID's seven vision objectives were listed, covering the BID's short- and long-term visions for the City Centre, other local strategies, a clear action plan, and ways to identify new opportunities and support existing businesses whilst marketing Colchester. The research done was summarised, including metrics and trends, but the Panel were cautioned that these were only relevant so long as the BID continued to engage with local residents.

The BID Manager listed top performing categories of businesses nationally, including fast food, bars, convenience stores, pet shops and barbers, although it was noted that

the growth in barbers shops had slackened somewhat. Independent retail was thriving across the UK and in Colchester, outperforming national chains in all categories.

Business types that were experiencing decline included hairdressers, bookies, charity shops, newsagents, banks, estate agents, shoe shops and vape stores. The results of research by Savills were given, with a key finding that community was the new anchor for retail environments. The BID was working to use the City Centre as a community focus, driving retail with more people wanting to shop in person. Another finding was an expansion of residential use being made of city centres. There was currently around 142m square feet of empty retail space in the UK, with retailers needing to move to smaller units whilst maintaining footfall. The concept of a fifteen minute city was explained, for reference.

Emerging trends were outlined, with cities maintaining their status as retail hubs, but with out-of-town shopping continuing to increase. New markets had led to expansion opportunities for retailers. The pandemic had led to success in retail categories for athletics, leisure, and home and DIY. Retail was now moving from transactional to experiential. Visits should be seen to be about socialising, not just spending, and if people related to a place, they were more likely to seek to spend in that location. Retailer considerations included financial implications, but also the effect on their brands.

Vacant unit data were discussed. Between August and November 2022, the vacancy rate for Colchester went from 9.85% to 10-11%. It was 8.88% as of September 2023. This was better than the regional and national rates of vacancy. Work was being undertaken to understand the reason for vacant units, which was needed if the spaces were to be filled.

The BID Manager noted that, according to CACI research, in the East of England Colchester ranked as sixth out of 508 locations when it came to potential spend. The area's population data and number of potential customers were given, with the City Centre attaining 79.1% of retail spend in the Colchester catchment area, followed by Tollgate and Turner Rise retail parks.

The Panel was shown the 'Brilliant Basics' ambitions for the City Centre, including improved understanding of those who use the City Centre, improvements to the streetscape, public realm and vacant units, improving access and helping independent business owners. Communications efforts were being made with partners to better show what opportunities and experiences Colchester offered to residents and visitors, with a focus on how the City defined and marketed itself both to local residents and businesses and to those outside the immediate area. The strategy for this would depend upon partnership delivery with stakeholders, securing extra funding, be embedded in the City Centre Masterplan and would act as a backbone for a retail-focussed action plan. The BID Manager argued that the BID would need help in order to increase the number of pop-up schemes it could support.

Praise for the work done was given by Panel members. A Panel member noted that small businesses could sometimes be hard to reach, and asked what was being done to grow small businesses and to work with landlords to improve the future for small and medium-sized enterprises [SMEs]. The BID Manager explained that a small

business fund was already in place to support small enterprises, and that a churn rate of local businesses was a positive thing, reducing the number of outdated businesses and seeing innovative enterprises start up, bringing new offerings to the local market. Small units in the City Centre were quickly taken by new firms, whereas it was the larger units which struggled to find occupants. Around 15 contacts per week were made with the BID where firms were seeking small units in the City Centre, with the main issue being visibility of the empty larger units. Most independent traders were single-person operators. Tackling crime against businesses and antisocial behaviour was a priority for the BID, alongside supporting independent businesses. A landlord group was being launched to inform them of the BID's strategies and ways in which landlords could help.

A Panel member noted that the agenda items talked about the future of retail in the CITY Centre, but did not mention the retail centre located in Stanway Ward. The member outlined the history of those parts of Stanway which had been designated as 'employment land', before being redesignated as 'retail land.' Stanway was now a centre for retail and the Panel member asked what future and vision for the ward's retail offering had been laid out, and where the investment strategy for that area was. A wider retail and investment strategy was requested, to cover the whole wider Colchester area, along with a marketing and branding effort for Stanway retail. The BID Manager explained that the BID was funded by businesses in the City Centre, and covered only that area, going on to disagree that Stane Park and Tollgate in Stanway were the primary retail centre in the area. The BID Manager estimated that the City Centre had a retail offering around four to five times larger than that in Tollgate and Stane Park, albeit with the expectation that more national retailers would be seeking to take new sites in out-of-town retail developments such as the ones in Stanway. The BID Manager did agree that a wider strategy to cover all retail centres would be welcome, and that the different centres should work together to complement each other.

Sandra Scott, Place Strategy Manager, gave a wider picture of local retail centres, in planning terms, as the adopted Local Plan covered the wider hierarchy of centres, with the historic City Centre at its core, whilst recognising the roles of the other centres. Work had been started on the next review of the Local Plan, looking to update the evidence base used, and looking at all centres, which also included places such as Wivenhoe and Tiptree. The work of the BID would be included in this, and the points raised by the Policy Panel would be addressed within the process. Another Panel member noted that the Colchester area had a number of smaller shopping parades, where no-one assisted the letting of units or helped independent businesses to take them when empty, then asking whether local small retailers and start-ups knew that help was possible from COLBEA or the Council. The Panel were informed that there were now business incubation units being set up in Stanway.

A member of the Panel ventured that the reporting and presentation to the Panel should be done primarily as Council officers reporting to the Panel, not as a promotional presentation by the Colchester BID. The Panel member further argued that the BID and Council should talk of unit occupancy rates, rather than vacancy rates, in order to change to a more positive mindset. The Panel asked whether Colchester had a large number of smaller landlords, or a small number of large landlords. The BID Manager answered that around half of the City Centre units were

owned by six or seven major landlords, with many smaller landlords also operating and who were often very receptive to the BID's work to support businesses. The BID had worked hard to build relationships with landlords, and this was augmented by the BID's ability to quickly assist with the filling of empty units.

Questions were asked by a Panel member as to why Wilkin and Son did not have a tea room in Colchester, unlike places such as Southwold and Chelmsford. The BID Manager informed the Panel member that there had been such a tea room in Colchester, at the Minorities. A representative of Wilkin and Son sat on the Place Board of the BID, and the BID Manager offered to ask him why there was not a Wilkin and Son Tearoom in the City.

Officers were asked about societal change and, with the Council trying to deliver services with less money to spend, how it would obtain the income needed to pay for work to guide societal change. The BID Manager described his pride in the partnership working with others, explaining that societal changes happened through such partnership, with about half of changes noted being organic in nature, such as the Hospital integrating its services into social centres. Pride of place was needed in the City Centre and a Youth Board was being set up to assist with this. Karen Turnbull, Economic Strategy Specialist, agreed that it was necessary to create loyalty to the local centres, making them destinations of choice so that people spent time and money at them. The Council was quick to apply for funding when pots became available, with the Jumbo development an example of success. Investment was needed in public realm, so as to increase Colchester's competitiveness and attract businesses.

Councillor King, Leader of the Council, stated his appreciation of the quality of work done and talked of the different views held about Colchester, including by people who have moved to the area. The Leader agreed that the whole wider Colchester area needed to be marketed, as a multi-centre city which included a university. The Council would need to play its part in partnerships and the Leader praised the progress of the BID, finding its role working with the Council and Businesses. The Leader asked the BID Manager if there was anything more the BID would like to ask of the Council. The BID Manager emphasised the importance of the Council demonstrating that it is pro-business. Small business owners would not have time to read dense policies, so the Council needed to communicate clearly with them. The Leader stated that communications were now better coordinated and prioritised, suggesting that the Policy Panel may wish to look at the collective marketing of Colchester.

A Panel member expressed interests in the transformational programme, and praised the data provided. The Panel member asked what the definition of 'good' would be for the programme work, and how outcomes would be measured. Officers were also asked what the actual current spend was, and how the potential spend figures given had been calculated. The BID Manager explained that the BID needed to be fluid, with key performance indicators [KPIs] set for each separate project, such as for the recent Soapbox Derby. For the Council, 'good' would be a churn of new businesses, regular engagement with residents, inward investment, and the ability of business operations to evolve. A number of new initiatives from the BID and Council were reaching out to bring in new businesses. Footfall, sales conversions and occupancy rates were all monitored, but a narrative was needed as to how to market Colchester. Nowhere was

close to achieving its potential spending projection, not even reaching a tenth of potential spending levels. Tuesdays currently saw highest footfall in the City Centre, due to students from the Colchester Institute and colleges, and due to office workers, and the BID Manager committed to providing quantitative data on this subject.

The Panel discussed events held, and the increase in footfall and sales produced and asked for confirmation that data was collected to identify what types of events produced best results. The BID Manager confirmed this was the case, and that the Soapbox Derby had seen great success, with the worst-performing respondent business still seeing an increase in sales value of 10%, compared to its performance at that point in 2022. It was a huge event that had increased dwell on a Sunday, and the BID focus was on investing in the right types of event.

Questions were asked about City Centre crime and antisocial behaviour, and their impacts. The BID Manager stated that he had never before seen shop lifting and antisocial behaviour at the levels they had currently reached. This had been affected by resourcing issues and policing changes at Essex Police, and large retailers were removing loss-prevention staff, as it was more cost-effective to endure the thefts. Crime against businesses was not currently a priority of the Safer Colchester Partnership, but the BID Manager argued that it should be prioritised, as often it was linked to County Lines gang activities and safeguarding issues. It was noted that the current City Centre Public Space Protection Order [PSPO] was coming up for renewal in October 2023.

The Panel discussed the need to ensure that retail offer was spread in different locations that would facilitate access by all, including those who didn't drive or who had mobility problems. The BID Manager explained that the BID's Leisure Recovery Board was conducting an accessibility review of the City Centre, including physical accessibility and any issues encountered by neurodiverse visitors. Staff and independent retailers were being trained on how to accommodate people with mental health conditions. Different transport options were to be prioritised, with the intended rapid transit system being crucial.

A Panel member argued that the Colchester offer, as presented, was too complex as it featured 18 bullet points.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that: -

- a) Cabinet give approval for the Panel to receive a report from the City Status Marketing Task and Finish Group, as led by the Business Improvement District
- b) Cabinet commissions work, involving all relevant partners, to develop a Retail Strategy which addresses the retail offer beyond the city centre
- c) In light of the Panel's concerns regarding increasing anti-social behaviour and crimes against businesses (including shoplifting), Cabinet advocates that the Safer Colchester Partnership should assign a higher priority to tackling anti-social behaviour and crimes against businesses, and that all local partnerships should work together to address these problems

83 Future of retail vision

Note: This item was considered and discussed in conjunction with the item ‘City Centre Marketing & Inward Investment’. The discussion and recommendations can be found under minute 82 within the minutes of this meeting.

84 Cost of Living Crisis – Council Response reflection and next steps

Zoë Raven, Employment & Financial Support Team Manager, presented the update on the Council’s actions to support residents during the cost of living crisis. The milder -than-expected Winter of 2022-23 had been fortunate for residents and the Council. The Employment & Financial Support Team Manager laid out the structure of her team, which took a holistic approach to help residents with the financial difficulties they faced, and to find appropriate help from other organisations. Changes to the team were impending, and the different roles were explained, such as the Community Support Employment Officers [currently officer, singular] who helped to ensure residents got help when dealing with the Department for Work and Pensions, and benefits problems, as well as overcoming barriers to employment.

The Employment & Financial Support Team Manager highlighted that the number of Welfare Benefit Specialists had gone from 2.4 full-time equivalent [FTE] hours, down to just one FTE officer. This loss of capacity had meant that the Team had had to stop advising that it could help with Disability Living Allowance applications, as other organisations could provide this help. The remaining officer had been inundated with requests to assist with welfare applications and tribunals.

The services and support provided by the Council was listed, alongside those provided by Essex County Council [ECC]. The Council’s response to the cost of living crisis was outlined, including numbers assisted, referrals made, payments made, and contacts followed up. Month-on-month workloads continued to increase, with the team being very busy. The ‘cost of living’ webpage provided the requested and required functionality, but was not easy to navigate as it continually required updates to be made to it.

The Cost of Living Roadshow was described, working with parish and town councils and local groups to identify a range of venues across the wider city area. The footfall at each event was given, with rural areas seeing the lowest numbers attend. ASDA was the roadshow location with the highest number of approaches from members of the public.

Partnership working was highlighted, including officers and the Head of Service giving presentations at the Job Centre Plus and at Community 360 and the Foodbank. Partners worked hard to identify whether hardship was recurring, its causes and ways to address it. The Fuel Bank’s work was mentioned, with referrals to it of people in fuel crisis. The eligibility criterion was previously being in fuel poverty, but fuel poverty had increased and was so widespread that this could not continue, and eligibility restricted further. In answer to questions, Michelle Tarbun, Head of Health Partnerships & Wellbeing, informed the Panel that statistics for use of heat banks were not available, as the Council had worked with Community 360 to map and advertise locations, but had not itself provided heat bank sites, and so had no usage data. It was expected

that a similar effort would be made this Winter, and information would be circulated when possible. The Council's Team had less resource than in 2022-23, so work was pivoting to signpost residents to other groups and organisations which offered help and advice.

The One Colchester Cost of Living video had been relaunched and the Employment & Financial Support Team had worked with other teams to distribute leaflets, including at outreach locations, because the Team had more limited resources this year.

Future planned steps were described, such as reframing efforts to focus on reducing financial inequality and work on Winter resilience. There would be a reduction in outreach work. Support was still available to help people on resettlement schemes, prepping participants for employment and/or engaging with the benefits system. Help with garden waste charges was also described, which would be available for residents on the Local Council Tax Support Scheme. Updates to parish and town councils would continue.

The Employment & Financial Support Team Manager explained that the Team were investigating funding opportunities to pay for the retention of the Team. Michelle Tarbun, Head of Health Partnerships & Wellbeing, informed the Panel that there were funding opportunities, and that the Council was hopeful that it would receive funding from external partners. The Team was well established, and the Council wanted to retain its experience and abilities. A case study was given to show the positive effects and outcomes for a resident in financial difficulty who had contacted the Council and been helped with advice and action.

The Panel thanked the Employment & Financial Support Team and expressed appreciation for the work it did. Concern was expressed that there was now only one Welfare Benefits Specialist and a Panel member pushed for the reflection of this in a recommendation to Cabinet that Cabinet should examine whether the Team had sufficient capacity, as its work could significantly improve lives of residents and ensure that people don't get into financial hardship, causing them to suffer and causing potentially higher costs to public organisations, such as the Council, in the long-run. Another Panel member argued that this team should be exempted from the current recruitment freeze in place. The Leader of the Council gave assurance that Cabinet had recognised the circumstances in the past year and that, although he could make no promises before a proper review, he agreed that the work of this team was very important. Assurance was given by the Leader that the Team would be given the authority to use all available flexibility to ensure its work continued.

The Employment & Financial Support Team Manager informed the Panel that, prior to the changes to the Team, it had succeeded in getting a total of £548k of extra benefits to local residents who were entitled to additional benefits, which was a significant amount of additional money coming in to the Colchester area. The Manager also explained some of the mitigations put in place to lessen the heavy workload on the single Welfare Benefits Specialist still employed by the Council. The Employment & Financial Support Team Manager explained that this role was one step before being a full welfare lawyer, and that it was hard to recruit to the role at present, due to the time of year and the need to be able to ensure the future level of work expected.

A Panel member asked if the relaunched Cost of Living Crisis video could be circulated to all councillors, for use in social media. Michelle Tarbun, Head of Health Partnerships & Wellbeing, promised to share the video with all councillors and parish councils.

A member of the Panel pointed out that it was important to make sure that people eligible for pension credits actually claimed and received them, as they acted as a 'passport' to allow the claiming of other benefits. The Employment & Financial Support Team Manager agreed and noted that they often had to work hard to persuade people to claim pension credit and Attendance Allowance, as many were reluctant to claim benefits, even when they were eligible.

The Panel discussed the statistics given for different types of contacts and support given. The Employment & Financial Support Team Manager clarified that some individuals had multiple contacts or ways in which the Council had assisted them, and so would be counted under more than one category. Examples were given of demographics who were not entitled to public funds, but who often experienced hardship, such as students, applicants for asylum and people on resettlement schemes.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that Cabinet agree that adequate staffing levels are vital for the Employment & Financial Support Team to conduct its work, given the essential work it does to support residents, and the likely additional costs to the Council and public services later, if eligible residents are not able to access the advice and support provided by this team.

85 Work Programme 2023-24

A Panel member asked for clarification regarding two 'to be confirmed' items on the Work Programme. The first was 'Levelling Up Fund and Town Deal' and the second was 'Future of Sports and Leisure Strategy'. Owen Howell, Democratic Services Officer, gave assurance that he would find out what the situation was regarding the former item, and that the latter item was confirmed for the Panel meeting scheduled for 29 November 2023.

RESOLVED that the Panel approved its work programme for 2023-24.