



Scrutiny Panel

Item
13

14 March 2023

Report of	Chief Operating Officer	Author	Owen Howell Tel. 282518
Title	Annual Scrutiny Report		
Wards affected	Not Applicable		

This is a report setting out the work of the Scrutiny Panel during 2022/23

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report sets out the work of the Scrutiny Panel during 2022/23 and requests that the Panel recommend the report to Full Council for approval on 19 July 2023.

2. Action Required

- 2.1 The Panel is asked to consider and comment on the draft Annual Scrutiny Report.
- 2.2 The Panel is asked to recommend this report to Full Council for approval on 19 July 2023.

3. Background Information

- 3.1 The Constitution states the Scrutiny Panel shall report annually to the Full Council on its work and make recommendations for future work programmes and amended working methods if appropriate.
- 3.2 The purpose of the report is to inform the Council of the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Panel, and for the Full Council to form an opinion of the effectiveness of the scrutiny function. The final report will be submitted to Full Council for consideration and approval following endorsement by Scrutiny Panel members.
- 3.3 This Scrutiny Report is a descriptive record of the scrutiny reviews undertaken by the Scrutiny Panel in 2022/23. It also provides a report on any work undertaken by the Scrutiny Panel in its role as Crime and Disorder Committee for the Council.
- 3.4 The draft Annual Report gives a general overview of the series of Portfolio Holder briefings received by the Scrutiny Panel during 2022-23. A link has been provided for members to access the relevant minutes for individual briefings on the Council website. The Panel may wish to consider whether it wishes for copies of the minutes of these briefings to be collated to form a background document to the Annual Report when it is presented to Full Council. Whilst detail from individual briefings has been omitted from this report, any resolutions or recommendations which arise from those briefings are shown within the report.

4. Standard and Strategic Plan References

- 4.1 Scrutiny and challenge was integral to the delivery of the Strategic Plan 2020-2023 priorities and direction for the Borough as set out under the strategic themes of:
- [Tackling the climate challenge and leading sustainability](#)
 - [Creating safe, healthy and active communities](#)
 - [Delivering homes for people who need them](#)
 - [Growing a fair economy so everyone benefits](#)
 - [Celebrating our heritage and culture](#)
- 4.2 The Council recognises that effective local government relies on establishing and maintaining the public's confidence, and that setting high standards of self-governance provides a clear and demonstrable lead. Effective governance underpins the implementation and application of all aspects of the Council's work.

5. Appendices

- 5.1 Appendix A – Draft Scrutiny Panel Annual Report 2022-23.

Scrutiny Panel Annual Report 2022-23

This Annual Report demonstrates the contribution made by the Scrutiny Panel at Colchester Borough Council.

Scrutiny Panel Role

The role of the Scrutiny Panel is to examine the Council's policies and strategies from a Borough-wide perspective and ensure that the actions of the Cabinet accord with the Council's policies and budget. The Panel also reviews corporate strategies that form the Council's Strategic Plan, Council partnerships and the Council's budgetary guidelines, and scrutinises Cabinet or Portfolio Holder decisions which have been called in.

The Scrutiny Panel in 2022/23

The function of the Scrutiny Panel continued to be important, given the challenges faced by the Council in addressing the effects of the extreme financial pressures caused by the macroeconomic situation in which the UK finds itself, and the formation of a new Council Administration in May 2022. Pressures on the Budget required the Council to address changes in income and expenditure to continue to provide services in a safe but successful manner under difficult circumstances. As a consequence, the Council was required to continue to innovate and look for different ways to mitigate financial pressures, and to adapt service provision in ways which sought to enable the continued delivery of vital services throughout the Borough, whilst minimising costs. The Scrutiny Panel played an important role in examining the strategic decision making relating to the Council's delivery of services.

The Panel continued to carry out its annual programme of scrutinising the Council's financial affairs, budget setting and performance against its Strategic Plan. In-depth and detailed examination of the Council's draft Budget for 2023-24 was carried out, supported by members of the Cabinet and the Head of Finance/Section 151 Officer and his team.

The success of Scrutiny Panel reviews depended on the involvement of Councillors, Council officers, partner organisations, expert witnesses and members of the public, and the Chairman of the Scrutiny Panel would like to thank everyone for their contribution to the work of the Scrutiny Panel in 2022/23.

Call-ins

The general low level of call-ins and matters of urgency on Scrutiny Panel agendas suggests that the governance arrangements within the Council are working effectively.

One call-in request was received during 2022-23, relating to a decision taken by the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services and Waste. This decision was published on 9 February 2023 and was as follows:

To agree to change the current free operating model for the Saturday Household Drop-off Service so that the Council only offers a selection of chargeable Saturday collection services to residents' associations, parish councils, managing agents or other organisations, with the fees as set out within the report.

The call-in raised the following concerns:

- No consultation with residents.
- No consultation with staff.
- Will increase fly tipping.
- Will affect those most vulnerable who do not have access to a vehicle.
- Is against the Council's Climate policy as it will increase vehicular movements going to recycling centres.
- Will increase domestic waste collection services

The call-in period was for ten working days, and a call-in request was received on 20 February 2023 and declared valid by the Council's Monitoring Officer, based on the first two concerns raised, as shown above. An additional meeting of the Scrutiny Panel was scheduled for 3 March 2023 in order to consider this call-in.

As Lead member on the call-in, Councillor Lissimore presented and explained the reasons given for challenging the decision in question. Councillor Goss, as Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services and Waste then answered these points and explained how the decision had been taken. The Panel discussed each of the points raised and considered whether enough consultation had occurred, and whether it agreed with the challenges concerning effects on fly tipping, other Council services and on residents.

The Panel noted the explanation of the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services and Waste regarding the work which officers of the Council had done in relation to this decision, showing that consultation of officers had occurred, however concern was raised that no consultation of the public or councillors had been carried out. The Portfolio Holder explained that only 120 out of 193,000 residents used the service [0.06%], and that consultation was not carried out as the users of the service consisted of less than 1% of the population. The Panel discussed this, and asked questions about Cabinet's approach to consultations and what the percentage of residents being affected by a decision would lead to a consultation. The Panel raised concern that there was no policy or guidance to guide Portfolio Holders as to when consultation should be carried out of residents and councillors in regard to decisions taken.

The Panel considered the concerns regarding the likely effects on vulnerable residents, council services and fly tipping rates. Individual members of the Panel voiced their concerns as to the potential effects, however the Panel decided that the final three points raised in the call-in, as shown above, could

not be evidenced. The view was given that it could not be shown that the decision taken would affect those without a vehicle or go against climate policies due to increasing vehicle journeys to recycling centres (as almost all would need access to a vehicle to transport waste items to the current collection points), or that there would be an increase in use of domestic waste collection services.

The Panel discussed the potential for increased fly tipping, and increased costs of dealing with this. The Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services and Waste gave the view that no increase was expected and therefore no increased cost had been factored into the estimate of the savings generated by this decision. Panel members expressed concern that no information or consideration regarding this issue was contained in the decision report.

RESOLVED that the decision WAS-002-22 [Review of Saturday Household Drop-off Service] be referred back to the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services and Waste, for further consideration, with the recommendation that the Portfolio Holder addresses the following concerns: -

- (a) That the decision had not been subject to consultation and the Panel was concerned that there did not appear to be a policy or formal guidance to guide Cabinet and individual portfolio holders as to how to approach consultations and in what circumstances they should be carried out;
- (b) That the potential for increased fly tipping which may be caused by this decision has not been addressed, that more data analysis of the likelihood of this happening should have been conducted and content included in the decision report to lay out the expected effects and additional costs to the Council, even if it no increase in fly tipping or Council costs is expected.

Decisions taken under urgency provisions

Certain decisions may be taken by Portfolio Holders or Cabinet under urgency provisions within the Constitution. Decisions taken by Cabinet or Portfolio Holders under urgency provisions are decisions made to take immediate action on urgent matters, which must then be reported on to the Scrutiny Panel at the earliest possible meeting. Such decisions are not subject to the usual decision making/call in process.

The Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules state that; 'A decision would be urgent if any delay likely to be caused by the Call-In procedure would seriously prejudice the legal or financial position of the Council or the decision relates to the commencement of a statutory consultation process.'

At the Panel's first full meeting of 2022-23, the Chairman underlined his expectation that, for any decisions taken under special urgency provisions, the Panel would expect to be provided with a clear timeline of the decision making, to show why there had been a need for the special urgency provisions to be used.

No decisions were taken under special urgency provisions during 2022-23 and by the time of the writing of this report.

Pre-decision scrutiny of decision making.

During 2022/23 the Scrutiny Panel conducted proactive scrutiny of key strategies and decisions to be made by Cabinet, including the setting of the Council's draft Budget for 2022-23.

Colchester's Housing Strategy 2022-27

On 5 July 2023, the Panel reviewed the draft Housing Strategy, due to be put before Cabinet for adoption on 6 July 2023.

The Chairman explained that the Panel would look at the Strategy and offer views as to whether it was fit for purpose. Praise was given for the clear presentation and explanation of the key priorities and how the Strategy had been formed around them. Questions were asked as to how to supply the greatest amount of necessary housing for sale and whether funding would be provided to housing associations for affordable housing developments or purchases.

The Panel discussed the lack of affordable housing, the effect this had an increasing demand pressure in the rental market, and evictions from private rental properties, caused by landlords selling up and a variety of other reasons.

The Panel questioned the targets set, such as an increase to 30% for affordable housing as a percentage of new build properties. The Strategic Economic Growth Manager outlined the range of different types of affordable housing schemes possible, with the Council striving to achieve a balance of the different types. The Council now routinely and successfully demanded that 30% of homes in new development be affordable housing. The four main avenues to increase affordable housing were to insist on it being included in developments (as planning gain), for the Council to build affordable housing itself, to buy stock (including homes sold under 'Right to Buy' provisions, and to work with non-profit deliverers (such as alms houses) to help them build more. A Panel member pushed for stronger wording than to 'seek' 30% of properties on new development to be affordable housing, and for the Council to examine why it does not achieve this 30% for all major developments. It was confirmed that the draft Strategy did call for 30% on all major developments, and that the Council sought this from all new major developments.

Members discussed the instances where developers agreed to a set percentage of affordable housing, but later sought to reduce or remove requirements for affordable housing, on viability grounds. Assurance was given that the Council did its best, case by case, to hold developers to the requirement. Any request for variations to the requirement would need to be backed up by evidence to prove unviability. The Panel recommended to Cabinet that the Council retains a target that 30% of the properties to be built for any major development must be required to be affordable housing.

The Panel discussed the possibility of prioritising local people to give them first chance to buy new affordable housing, before it is offered on the open market. The Portfolio Holder explained that, working with CBH, partnership schemes, the Council were looking at ways to offer new properties to local people first, such as the developments on sites formerly used for garages. A member highlighted a pilot trial, where an application for a village development had been granted subject to a local prioritisation scheme being tested when the properties were ready to be sold. Panel members suggested that the draft Strategy contain content that would lay out the Council's approach to prioritising sale of affordable housing to people with local connections or residency.

This item led the Scrutiny Panel to scheduled further consideration of Section 106 developer contributions and on family/local affiliation in letting or sale of new affordable housing. The former was scheduled for 14 March 2023, with the latter scheduled for 8 November 2022 and summarised within this Annual Report.

Draft Economic Strategy

At the Scrutiny Panel meeting on 13 December, the Panel conducted pre-decision scrutiny of the draft Economic Strategy.

the Strategy updated the Council's priorities as to how to boost the local economy, increase infrastructure (such as roads, healthcare, digital economy and broadband coverage), improve pay levels and inspire new projects.

Matt Sterling, Strategic Economic Growth Manager, explained that the Economic Strategy was closely linked to the Housing Strategy, and that it set out high-level priorities, alongside specific projects and actions and fitted these into an action plan. The three main strands of the strategy were firstly data (including economic trends, information and the strategy's evidence base), secondly engagement (with business and public sector representatives, one-to-one and partnership meetings), and thirdly an understanding of the Administration's priorities. All the priorities were intended to boost all parts of the area, urban and rural.

Inclusive economic growth was to be supported, with focus on business innovation and increasing the availability of skills. The Council aimed to leverage additional investment and infrastructure spending, whilst aiming to decarbonise and foster environmental sustainability. The Action Plan would set out how the Council intended to realise its aims.

Work was planned with ECC and the University of Essex on developing new care tech ideas and products. Detailed plans would be produced to court investments.

A digital work hub would be created to serve small technology businesses, alongside a new training hub. Details were given of grants won to increase the amount of training provided locally. A bid for the second round of levelling up funding was described. This included £20m for the city centre, and was accompanied by a bid for £500k from the rural prosperity fund.

The wide range of partnerships was described, including with the North Essex Economic Board, the University and with Colchester Ambassadors. These partnerships supported start up business and firms conducting importing and exporting.

Colbea advised on how to reduce business costs and emissions, assisted by ECC.

The Strategic Economic Growth Manager confirmed that specific targets to improve life chances were a key priority for him. Regarding predictions and expected outcomes, caution was given that it was likely that the more specific predictions were, the less ambitious the plans would be. It was hard to predict the next three years, but the Strategy was to give a clear sense of what the Council would do and for what it would aim. Targets would be set for each year and progress reports produced. The Strategy committed the Council to areas of activity and annual targets would flow from that.

The Panel considered the Strategy in comparison to those of other local authorities and queried what the unique selling points were for Colchester's Strategy. It was asked whether similarities to other plans were inevitable. The Strategic Economic Growth Manager gave assurance that similarities were not surprising, given that tier 2 local authorities had the same powers as each other, the same core responsibilities and similar needs. It was elements such as the commitment to a real living wage which differentiated Colchester's Strategy from many others. The Council was performing well in achieving its targets and more information would be in the development plan and outcomes reports.

More information was requested on what would be done to encourage tourism and whether infrastructure such as the Rapid Transit System (RTS) would give opportunities for new conference facilities and tourist options. The Strategic Economic Growth Manager confirmed work would be conducted on encouraging tourism and visits, within the Strategy. Focus on specific sectors had been avoided in this Strategy, but a bespoke tourism strategy was being considered, as this was a crucial part of the local economy.

The positives shown by the Strategy were discussed, including work with the University and the growth figures shown compared to those elsewhere. Increased income and value could be used to lead to higher wages and salaries. Significant amounts had been spent on training and the tech sector already in the years examined, and large amounts of data gathered relating to this.

The Leader summarised the Strategy as a prospectus to lay out the Council's way ahead, utilising good data and good people to set how the City positioned itself. Partnership with others, including businesses, would be key and was much more effective than it had formerly been.

The Leader and officers were asked what the Council's approach would be towards the large scale migration of workers who lived in Colchester but worked elsewhere. Colchester benefited from the spending of their income, but not from their skills and labour. The Strategic Economic Growth Manager confirmed that

his team had considered this issue and that it was included within the evidence base for the Strategy. The move to home working was a widespread trend and move away from commuting. This represented an opportunity to keep people in higher-paid jobs based in Colchester, but also a challenge as individuals could reside here but work elsewhere.

The Deputy Leader noted that the delivery plan would likely give the details requested by the Panel and that it would be key to see the additional funding leveraged on the back of the funding awards won by the Council. The Chairman expressed the assurance that the Panel had received from the Strategic Economic Growth Manager that metrics would be included in the delivery plan.

The Chairman thanked the Strategic Economic Growth Manager and confirmed that the Panel noted the quality and thoroughness of the report and Strategy, and did not wish to make any formal recommendations to Cabinet.

Local Council Tax Support Scheme 2023/24

The Panel scrutinised the proposed Scheme at its meeting on 13 December 2022 and were briefed on the proposal to increase entitlement from 80% up to 85%. Around 5,500 households were affected, amongst those which had been most hit by UK economic problems. The cost of this change would be around £40k extra per year, expected to be recovered elsewhere such as by reducing write-offs and recovery costs. An overview was given of the consultation responses received.

The Panel discussed the importance of payment requirements being matched to ability to pay, with a need for increased generosity on the part of the Council at this time. In response to questions, the Benefits and Support Manager confirmed that there had been an increase in cancellations of direct debit orders in the past year. A Panel member suggested that direct debits could be promoted as being the easiest way to receive automatic payment of disbursements from Government, such as the recent £150 rebate on council tax, automatically paid to those who were on direct debit schemes.

The Panel agreed that the proposed changes were necessary, the additional cost was not large, and that the Scheme should be recommended for approval.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that the proposed LCTS scheme for 2023/24 be approved.

Peer Challenge Review report and action plan

The Panel received a report from the Chief Operating Officer inviting it to consider the report on the Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge Action Plan submitted to Cabinet and inviting it to make recommendations to Cabinet. The Chief Operating Officer attended the meeting to present the report and to assist the Panel.

The Chief Operating Officer stressed the importance and impartiality of the LGA Process. The Peer Review process was a key element of sector lead effectiveness and improvement. The Peer Challenge team was constituted of

senior Councillors and officers, and had met over 150 people over the course of three days. The team used a process known as triangulation whereby an issue had to be raised or mentioned three times before it was considered for inclusion in the review. The report and Action Plan addressed the key recommendations made by the Peer Review. The Peer Review Team had also given advice on a wide range of other issues which was being addressed and tracked internally.

Members of the Panel noted that not all the concerns raised by the Peer Review were addressed by the Action Plan, highlighting for example that the concerns around duplication of efforts across the different tiers of local government, scrutiny and diversity, and the recommendation that KPIs were reviewed were not referenced in the Action Plan. The Chief Operating Officer explained that the Key Performance Indicators were being reviewed so that they reflected the new financial realities. The revised KPIs would be reviewed by the Panel at its meeting in March 2023. The Chief Operating Officer reminded the Panel that the Action Plan addressed the key recommendations only and that other issues were being followed up and monitored. There was clear ownership of these issues by named officers. The document tracking these other issues would be circulated to the Panel following the meeting and could be reviewed the Panel in future if it wished. It could also recommend to Cabinet that other issues be included in the Action Plan if it felt they were particularly significant. The Peer Challenge team would review progress against their key recommendations in July, and it was open to the Panel to look again at progress against the Action Plan next municipal year, after this review had taken place.

The Panel indicated that it should look again at the Action Plan again in the next municipal year. It was satisfied that the Action Plan had picked up the most important issues identified by the Peer Review Team and that action was underway to deal with other advice and issues identified. The Panel did not consider that it was necessary to schedule a review of the work on the advice and issues below the key recommendations at this point. Members of the Panel could raise any issues they were concerned about once they had reviewed the tracking document.

The Panel then scrutinised each of the key recommendations in the Action Plan in turn:

1. Focus on City Status. Use this as an opportunity to galvanise partners, improve the Borough's economic and cultural strength and raise the voice of Colchester.
2. Get a firmer grip on the capital programme – manage all risks and improve your planning to ensure you have appropriate strategic finance, programme and project capacity and the resources to deliver.
3. Co-design a compelling and longer-term place based narrative/city vision to define Colchester for the future.
4. Strengthen your political and officer “leaders of place” roles and look beyond Colchester – map your anchor institutions, partners and stakeholders.
5. Review your priorities and projects and refocus on delivering “Brilliant Business As Usual” and strengthen your corporate resources.

6. Strongly consider whether changing your election cycle will help you achieve your goals, ambitions and deliver improved services for Colchester residents.
7. Better define with your staff what “hybrid working” means for Colchester City Council and provide a clear definition. Also clarify how the new Colchester City Council values will be designed and embedded, communicating to staff how these define the Council and will help achieve Colchester’s ambition.
8. Commission an independent review of Colchester Commercial Holdings Ltd and its subsidiaries, also undertake an internal review of Colchester Borough Homes to assess whether the companies are realising the benefits they were established to deliver.

The Panel noted that actions outlined and the proposed timetable in the Action Plan, It was noted that the actions were well underway and that the initial risk assessment of CCHL was due to be reported to Governance and Audit Committee on 17 February 2023. In the circumstances, the Panel did not consider that it was necessary to make a recommendation to Cabinet.

RESOLVED that the Panel review the Peer Review Action Plan again during the course of the 2033-24 municipal year.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that it consider the following amendments to the Peer Review Action Plan:-

- (a) Recommendation 3 (Co-design a compelling and longer term place based narrative/city vision to define Colchester for the future) to be more clearly defined as it was wider than the sole reference to City Status in the Action Plan implied. It should include clear links to the Strategic Plan, City Centre Masterplan and legacy connections and other longer-term place based issues, such as public transport.
- (b) Recommendation 4 (Strengthen your political and officer “leaders of place” roles and look beyond Colchester – map your anchor institutions, partners and stakeholders) to include a wider reference to the role of all Councillors as community leaders and to explain how relationships with anchor institutions, partners and stakeholders would be strengthened following the mapping exercise.
- (c) Recommendation 5 (Review your priorities and projects and refocus on delivering “Brilliant Business as Usual” and strengthen your corporate resources) to highlight the linkages between the Strategic Plan and the budget and to show how resources will be matched to meet priorities.
- (d) Recommendation 6 (Strongly consider whether changing your election cycle will help you achieve your goals, ambitions, and deliver improved services for Colchester’s communities) to include a timeline and highlight the Boundary Commission review as an essential milestone in the timeline.

Budget setting for 2023-24

At its meeting on 24 January 2023, the Scrutiny Panel scrutinised the draft Budget 2023-24, Capital Programme and Medium-Term Financial Forecast. Members of Cabinet and senior officers presented the extreme financial challenges facing local authorities, and the efforts made to mitigate the worst impacts whilst producing a balanced budget for the coming financial year. The Panel were also informed of the reductions in service which Cabinet felt were necessary in order to produce a balanced budget.

The Panel discussed concerns regarding the reductions to Neighbourhood Services and members' wishes to have more details on these, including plans to charge for garden waste collection. Concerns over the plans to charge for garden waste collection were discussed, including the intention to commence this service in Winter, when demand would be at its lowest, rather than when demand was high and less elastic. The Scrutiny Panel considered impacts on recycling rates. The Leader of the Council and Chief Operating Officer offered additional detail and information on the expectations of uptake of the new collection service, and the budgetary effect expected.

The Panel discussed whether it had been provided with the necessary information to assess the Council's financial position, and the Chairman underlined the Panel's need to identify and then see figures which it considered to be necessary. A reasonable balance between of detail was needed, to ensure appropriate information was provided, but in an understandable way. The Leader of the Council agreed and emphasised the Administration's wish to be transparent, having already scheduled time to go through specific details with members who had voiced concerns. Any data requested would be provided if it were possible to do so.

The Panel discussed the transformative and non-transformative savings listed and the challenges presented in the Budget, where an increase in income had been dwarfed by inflationary costs.

Expected cuts to staffing were discussed and concerns raised that officers such as Zone Wardens should not be lost. Panel members asked for more information as to which jobs would be lost, especially in Neighbourhood Services. It was also noted that response rates in the customer service team were marked to be improved, but this was queried, given that restrictions were being imposed on overtime hours. Suggestions were made by Panel members that workplace levies and leasing of private car parks might be options which could save the Council money. The Leader of the Council agreed that it was important to have officers where they were needed and gave assurance that improvements in customer service response times would be possible with new best practice and improved technology. More information would be provided when possible. In Neighbourhood Services, the proposition was for ten posts to go, although not necessarily through forced redundancies. Richard Block, Chief Operating Officer, underlined how hard decisions had been, needing to look at all options for cutting costs. £13.8m expenditure was still planned for Neighbourhood Services and cuts in other areas would be even more extreme if the Council were to ringfence spending on Neighbourhood Services.

The Scrutiny Panel considered the proposed £50k savings from cuts to Environmental Health and asked if there were any ways to increase income to

avoid a need to reduce services. Mel Rundle, Safety and Protection Manager, explained the situation and gave assurances regarding the teams functions, which included private sector housing, food safety and environmental protection. It did not include licensing matters. The Team could not charge for work such as food safety and environmental protection, and savings were being sought by not replacing certain outgoing officers.

Regarding the proposed recruitment freeze, a Panel member noted that a vacancy factor assumption had already been made, and sometimes caused issues. The members of Cabinet were asked if the recruitment freeze would compound problems. The Panel heard that the vacancy factor allowance was a reflection of gaps between outgoing and incoming officers in roles. The freeze would mean that all vacancies would be reviewed as to whether replacement officers are needed. There would be a full assessment on each post affected. Based on a turnover rate of 15%, it was expected that this freeze would save around £500k. The Panel queried what effect this would have on morale. The Portfolio Holder for Resources explained that staff understood the severity of the budget position and wished to preserve or increase their salaries as far as possible. Officers clarified that recruitment would continue to roles where corporate risk would be increased if vacancies were maintained, or where roles are self-funded or funded from external sources.

A Panel member noted that the Council would be asking staff to take pay cuts, banning overtime and reducing fixed-term positions whilst increasing work pressures on officers, and expressed a preference for reducing the number of services provided, whilst maintaining staff conditions and improving the remaining services provided. The Portfolio Holder for Resources agreed that the Council was having to make the decision to do less, and explain the need for that decision to be made. The Leader explained that the changes to staffing followed the changes and reduction to the management team.

The Panel sought clarification on a wide range of points, seeking to understand and link the data shown across the various finance tables within the report and its appendices. Subjects scrutinised included the Council's pension commitments, treasury management strategy, use of reserves, contingencies for inflationary changes and the audit situation facing the Council and the local government sector.

The Panel, as a result of these considerations, requested and received a significant number of additional briefing notes to clarify aspects of the Council's finances. The Panel also recommended to Cabinet that more information and assurances be provided in the equality impact assessments which accompanied the Budget, that training be given to councillors on effective use of council reserves, that more information be provided on the proposals to charge for garden waste collection, and for pay inflation to be given more prominence in the Council's risk register.

2023-24 Housing Revenue Account estimates and Housing Investment Programme

On 24 January 2023, the Panel considered and discussed the reports provided which detailed the next year's rent increases, which were in line with

Government Policy, and the trading position of Colchester Borough Homes [CBH].

Darren Brown, Finance Manager (Business Partners), set out the proposals for 2023-24 and summarised the report provided. Government had introduced a limit on rent increases to seven percent in 2023-24. There were no indications of a similar restriction for 2024-25 yet. An overview was provided to the Panel of governmental policy changes, but the Finance Manager underlined that the main impacts had arisen from interest rates and high inflation.

The Asset Management Strategy [AMS] included the reviewing of outputs, and a report would be generated on this.

The Finance Manager explained the illustration of the debt curve in Appendix F, between years and to show the expected situations both with and without rent caps being in place. The Council aimed to maintain a healthy debt curve through the next 30 years.

The Panel considered the impact of rent caps, both positive for tenants, but also impacting on the Council and its income.

The Panel questioned and discussed matters such as:

- The management fee and services of Colchester Borough Homes
- Fluctuations in expected capital expenditure borrowing needs in future years
- The Heart of Greenstead Project

The Panel praised the high level of detail in the reports provided, stating that these were laid out in a way that was helpful for non-experts to understand, and approved the approaches and recommended decisions laid out for presentation to Cabinet for approval on 25 January 2023. Cabinet subsequently concurred and approved the recommended decisions.

Scrutiny Reviews at Colchester Borough Council

The Scrutiny Panel held a number of reviews during 2022/23.

Council Tax rebate

On 5 July 2022, the Panel examined how the Council was administering the rebate to assist residents with the increased costs of energy, having been requested by a Panel member at the Panel's meeting held on 7 June 2022. Councillor Cory, Portfolio Holder for Resources, and Samantha Preston, Group Manager – Customer, presented the report and expressed their thanks to the officers who had drawn up the scheme to make rebate payments and roll it out. A high percentage of eligible people paying Council Tax via direct debits had received their rebates. Officers were now focussing on identifying eligible Council Tax payers who did not use direct debits, and to use the options available to find ways to pay out the rebate. The discretionary payment scheme was explained, with details as to how it was and would be used.

The initial announcement of a Council Tax rebate was made in February, and it had been understood to be a challenging task to design and roll out a scheme for making rebate payments. The main challenge was that the Council Tax payment system had been designed to receive payments from the public, rather than to pay out funds. Officers had worked quickly to build this function into the system, then moving to identify eligible non-direct-debit payers of Council Tax and find appropriate ways to provide the rebate to them. An overview of this work was given, along with statistics relating to the percentages of claim rates by eligible Council Tax payers, with an estimated 8,000 residents to be contacted directly by officers to inform them as to how they can claim their rebate. The Panel was informed of the issues which had caused some eligible applicants to be rejected by the Government system, and the ways in which the Council was working to identify those who were in this situation and who were eligible to receive a rebate. Likewise, the Panel was informed of the Council's work to ensure that residents who were not able to engage online were not excluded and were informed of the ways in which they could receive their rebates. Work included direct contact and targeted communications aimed at reaching those who were hardest to contact.

£318k had been allocated for discrete payments to those in need who were not eligible for rebates from the main scheme. The Council was determined that all funding provided to it would be used to assist those residents who were in need. The Panel considered whether it might be useful for it to make recommendations to Cabinet to encourage Cabinet to ensure that no eligible residents were missed and that measures be in place to ensure that all discretionary funding was used to support residents in need. The Portfolio Holder for Resources gave assurance that the Council was already proceeding in line with these suggested recommendations and taking every measure possible, with a last resort being the crediting of individuals' Council Tax accounts with the rebate amounts, where all other options of payment had not been possible. This approach had been approved and the formal policy relating to the Council's payment of rebates would be amended to show this as soon as possible. Priority was being given to help those who were already in receipt of financial support from the Council. The Scrutiny Panel judged that, in light of the assurances given by the Portfolio Holder, recommendations at this stage would be unnecessary, but that they might be merited to show the confidence and approval that the Panel had gained from the assurances given to it.

A Panel member asked how residents could be directed to apply for discretionary funding, including in cases where Council Tax banding of a property was considered to be in need of review, and was told that this information could be provided by officers following the meeting.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that: -

- a) Cabinet acknowledges and continues to approve of the measures being used by officers to identify those eligible for Council Tax rebates and to pay out these rebates, in line with the robust assurances provided to, and accepted by, the Scrutiny Panel
- b) Cabinet approves of the crediting of eligible Council Tax accounts, as a last resort and where other options for payment of a rebate have been exhausted

Hythe Flooding

This report came to Scrutiny Panel on 5 July 2022 at the request of a Panel member, and that the report was an update on the partnership working underway to remedy the issue of flooding and an opportunity for the Panel to ascertain whether there was any value it could add by scrutinising the Council's approach. The information given did not suggest that any delays had been caused due to any lack of Council financial resource, or by extended decision-making.

Panel members described and discussed the membership of the Hythe Taskforce and its work. After one year of operation, complications had been found, such as the presence of fresh water flooding, with Distillery Lane and Bourne Pond contributing to the problem. Essex Highways and Anglian Water were suggested as responsible agents. Issues were then found with haphazard piping in place to deal with drainage. A Panel member urged all stakeholders to contribute to funding the solutions needed to these issues.

The results of a feasibility study relating to a possible temporary pump was still awaited. The Fire Authority had indicated that it was happy to have personnel on call to operate this as and when necessary.

Concern was raised by a Panel member that there was a lack of scrutiny of the Hythe Taskforce's work, and it was asked whether the funding pot for tackling Haven Road flooding could take section 106 funding contributions.

A Panel member outlined the background of the Hythe Taskforce, which had been brought together by The Honourable Will Quince, MP for Colchester, who sat as the Chairman of the Taskforce. The Taskforce aimed to facilitate cooperation between the agents which had the funding and expertise needed to end the flooding. A Panel member suggested that Will Quince could be invited to attend a future meeting of the Panel to explain the situation and answer questions. One member argued that the Council still had a responsibility to solve the flooding, given its historic operation of a port at the Hythe, and its continued holding of land in the area. The Council had sold off its dredger many years ago, with a lack of dredging suggested by a member as contributing to localised flooding. The Panel discussed whether to recommend that Cabinet took a lead on identifying what action to take and were informed that, whilst the MP's office was not in a position to offer scrutiny of the Hythe Taskforce, Scrutiny Panel had some ability, within its terms of reference, to scrutinise functions outside of those which were the responsibility of Cabinet.

The Panel considered whether it believed that actions were proceeding at an acceptable pace, or whether a scrutiny process could be undertaken whereby the Panel received regular reports, to ensure progress was made. A suggestion was also made that the Council could potentially offer project management services to assist the Taskforce, with the Panel making a recommendation to Cabinet to call for this to be offered. The Panel also discussed whether to recommend that Cabinet look to provide a temporary pump, however a consensus was reached that this was very unlikely to be agreed to, given the need for ongoing funding for its operation.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that Cabinet offers to provide the project management skills of the Council to assist the multi-agency Hythe Task Force in its work and in its efforts to identify and secure the funds necessary to resolve the flooding in the Haven Road area.

Bus Service Provision

On 5 July 2022, the Panel carried out a review of previous Scrutiny Panel considerations of local bus service provision, and aimed to assess whether a further review could add value.

The Panel considered whether it would be likely that local bus operators would participate in a third Scrutiny Panel review of bus provision, and whether the Panel could potentially make useful recommendations. Concern was raised by members that the Council had no powers over bus services and could not run its own services. It was accepted that sustainable transport was a vital issue for the Borough, but with very limited scope for the Panel to add value, it was argued by one member that the Panel should concentrate on issues where there was the potential for it to add value to the Council's actions or decision making. It was noted by another member that the Panel could examine whether the Local Plan and any associated Council policies or strategies were being carried out appropriately, including external plans and strategies for which the Council was a partner organisation, such as the Town Centre Masterplan.

The Panel considered whether it wished to recommend that Cabinet look at the issue of bus service provision, in the context of the major policies and strategies currently underway. Several members agreed that a larger-scale examination of the issues at play would be a significant job, but likely worth doing. One member of the Panel argued that there had been some success from past Scrutiny Panel reviews, albeit that there was little the Council could do to push for better bus services. Bus station provisions for Colchester was within the Town Centre Masterplan, which could come to the Panel for Scrutiny.

The Panel discussed possible ways to help increase bus usage, including deals, offers and a circular hopper bus system around central Colchester.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that Cabinet conducts work to consider and examine the potential ways in which the Council can push for improved bus service provision through the Borough, and promote its use by the public, in the context of the Council's current and emerging strategic plans and policies.

Review of Colchester Borough Homes: 2021-22 Performance

On 11 October 2022 the Panel welcomed guests from Colchester Borough Homes [CBH], and Councillor Julie Young, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities, to report on the performance of CBH during the preceding year.

the highlights and key points of the annual report being presented to the Panel. This covered subjects such as the demographic and diversity data relating to the Council's tenants, with an assurance that CBH used data effectively to inform and direct its work. The Panel were informed of the 35 homes which had had to be sold, under 'Right to Buy' provisions, as well as the 100 homes added

to the Council's stock through a variety of means. This project aimed to bring good-quality homes into use, with all homes brought into use via the scheme having an EPC [Energy Performance Certificate] rated C or better.

Overall, performance in the key areas monitored was rated as either 'good' or 'very good'. High satisfaction rates had been recorded, which compared well to the rates recorded by CBH's peers.

Problems had been experienced with average letting times, but the average time to re-let a property had reduced from the 30.96 days recorded in the report, and now stood at 23 days.

The Chief Executive provided an update on any eviction proceedings, explaining that Covid-19 had meant a protracted period when no court dates had been available, leading to a backlog. Whilst eviction proceedings remained the option of last resort for CBH, where this had proven necessary, the lengthened waiting time for court action had resulted in the accruing of rent arrears in those cases awaiting court proceedings.

The Panel were informed of the ongoing work to maintain the Council's housing stock and to ensure its quality, even in the face of challenges presented by a tough labour market, which also affected CBH's contractors. 99% of homes had now obtained an electrical safety certificate in the past five years. Building safety remained a priority, and would continue to do so, with CBH mindful of the Social Housing Regulation Bill currently before Parliament. This was expected to lead to more proactive regulation, inspections and additional requirements relating to the Company's key performance indicators [KPIs].

Examples were given of CBH's work in the Borough's communities, including engagement work with residents. More work was now able to take place in person, following the pandemic and end of lockdowns. CBH continued to listen to its tenants and engage with their views, widening the ways in which it did so, and having communication options open to all residents in Council homes.

The work of CBH in addressing, preventing and reducing homelessness was outlined. The Company's priority was to prevent homelessness. During 2020-21, 1,157 homelessness applications had been received by the Housing Solutions Team. 298 instances had been recorded where homelessness was prevented or relieved. 38 people had been helped through initiatives for reducing rough sleeping.

The Panel were briefed on the use of data by CBH to improve its services, with the Housemark benchmarking exercise showing that the company had provided good quality services at a low cost, in comparison to its peers within the region.

The Company's risk management approach, governance arrangements and Strategic Plan were outlined, with a focus on community engagement and outreach. Challenges included difficulties with staff retention in a competitive labour market. The Panel discussed the performance data given, seeking views on how benchmarking might change over the length of the company's Medium Term Delivery Plan. The Panel were informed that there would likely be additional pressure on rent collection, with arrears expected to rise as a result of

increased cost of living. Tenants were being affected by inflation, and ability to pay rent was decreasing. The company did however expect to maintain its performance level in comparison with peers. Increased costs might be experienced, including from dealing with increases in mental health problems and from rising costs of repair works.

The Panel queried the 2022-27 Delivery Plan and asked what assumptions had been made on the housing market and customers' ability to pay, and whether performance targets would need to be adjusted to take account of ongoing economic changes. The Panel were informed that CBH was being ambitious and had extended financial inclusion training to officers of the housing team. Challenges were being considered and plans drawn up to address them, including difficulties in contractor work, as a result of the economic climate. KPI targets were being based on benchmarking data and more information regarding assumptions made (relating to the Delivery Plan) could be circulated to members following the meeting, if they wished to see it. The Chairman requested that this be done.

The Management Agreement between CBC and CBH had previously been extended and was in place until August 2028, but CBH was planning further into the future. The provision of the next generation of housing was a key consideration. CBH would continue to work with Council colleagues and the Portfolio Holder to ensure that all housing KPIs continued to improve, as a key part of succeeding in providing a low-cost, high-quality service to the Council.

Regarding questions relating to CBH's pension liabilities, the Chairman directed that it would be unfair to insist on answers to be given at this meeting, given that this did not form part of the report before the Panel. Philip Sullivan, CBH Chief Executive addressed Councillor Sunnucks' concerns explaining the different deficits relating to the pension scheme, such as any deficits shown in the triennial valuation, which are often dealt with via an individual annual deficit payment, or a change in employer contribution, such as the last time this arose where the employer contribution was increased from 16% to 20%. The debt shown in the accounts was explained as an actuarial debt which would only materialise in the event of a 'cessation event', which would be a circumstance when every employee left the scheme.

The Panel questioned a range of aspects of the work of CBH, asking about the company's relationships with further education colleges, provision of apprenticeships and prioritising of people with local links for housing. The Chief Executive confirmed that the company offered apprenticeships, albeit wanting to do more, as well as being involved with training initiatives expected through the Garden Community project. Regarding prioritisations for housing, the company adhered to the legislation guiding assessments of need and homelessness duty. The Council and CBH worked well together to deal with rough sleeping locally and was one of 20 local authorities in the UK consistently recording that there were fewer than 10 rough sleepers in its area.

The Panel were told that the national policy pushing the sale of council housing was a problem and continued to hurt social housing. Added to this, the increase in mortgage costs would increase the problems caused by private landlords being less able to ease pressure on housing provision. Current national policies

weren't working, and the Chairman of the Board argued that the situation was putting lives at risk. The Portfolio Holder explained that the social value of housing is quantified in the procurement hub and that the Panel would receive a report in November on local links and how these related to lettings.

The Panel asked for information as to how housing officers and other staff were coping with stress, how many properties each officer covered and whether any areas had experienced recruitment problems. The Chief Executive agreed that a number of colleagues had been through difficult times, and the caseloads of housing officers had become more and more complex, with increasing challenges faced by residents. Each officer covered around 700 properties. Recruitment was difficult, and especially so in certain areas such as IT, asset management and specialist roles relating to electrical and mechanical work. The labour market was currently challenging. A member of the Panel raised concern that housing officers had workloads that were too heavy, which had increased whilst officer numbers had decreased. It was queried whether more officers could be recruited.

The Panel examined the relationship between Council and CBH and how much of this involved autonomous working, and how much was directed by the Council. The Chairman of the Board explained that shared services are being considered and confirmed that the Council set the pay scales for CBH too. The company wanted to deliver on the Council's priorities and work collaboratively, but problems with recruitment and retention were experienced due to the restraints on pay. The Portfolio affirmed Cabinet's commitment to working with CBH, with ways to get leaner service provision through collaborative working.

Family/local affiliation in letting and/or sale of local affordable housing and Gateway to Homechoice Allocations Policy

At the Panel meeting on 8 November 2022, Councillor Julie Young, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities addressed the Panel ahead of the Officer presentation and spoke of the housing crisis that there was in Colchester and drew Members attention to paragraph 4.16 and the unintended consequences if any changes were made to the prioritisation. The Portfolio holder explained that the Councils approach was consistent with other authorities that the Council was in partnership with and advised Members that there was a pilot which was looking into the issue before the Committee. The Cabinet Member requested that the Scrutiny Panel withhold any recommendations until the pilot scheme had concluded and the results analysed.

The Committee heard that there were occasions where the local lettings policy came into play, but these were in very specific cases and drew Members attention to the fact that there was a focus on the 235 people in temporary accommodation and that there were currently around 3,000 households on the Housing register waiting list.

Council's housing allocation policy which was a legal requirement and detailed the prioritisation of need. The Panel heard that any change to the policy would relegate the importance of need when prioritising any other characteristic. The Housing Strategy Co-ordinator outlined that there were two options for securing

housing through local lettings plans and also through Section 106 agreements. Local lettings could be on new developments or existing homes and applied to the specified properties with the agreement of the owner and can help improve areas tackling anti-social behaviour and confirmed that this approach had been taken with new build homes. The officer advised that in Section 106 Agreements the number, type, and size of the affordable houses were agreed at the development stage and were a legally binding agreement. It was noted that the report included in appendix A details of shared ownership. Attention was drawn to paragraph 4.16 and the unintended consequences that could ensue and could lead to households with a higher need may have to wait longer if a Family/ local affiliation policy was introduced. The Officer informed Members that there were instances where there was no interest in properties with an example that a rural property was not near employment centres and public transport links wouldn't make a commute viable.

The Panel were informed that there was a pilot scheme underway in Layer de la Haye where family and local affiliation were being taken into account however it was noted that the pilot may have had more effect in a more built up area.

The Panel questioned the officers regarding the question of need and how this was assessed if someone had moved into the area. The Officer responded that all cases of homelessness had to be assessed under the five tests of homelessness and would be considered on that basis with banding levels taken into account as well as other circumstances which meant assessment on a case by case basis.

Members of the panel praised the Council's services for housing and the work that was being undertaken but were concerned that the efficiency of the team was causing an influx of people from outside of the borough to move into the area to find housing. The Housing Strategy Co-ordinator advised Members that the Gateway to Homechoice register allowed the team to review data of people arriving from other areas and noted that the Council exported more people than importing them into the Council's housing stock.

In response to further questions from the Panel the officer responded that a housing needs survey was carried out for all applicants where they could add preferences of where they would like to live. It was noted from further questions regarding the criteria for housing need that strong and weak affiliations with an area and people could be integrated but would also be conditional to other factors. The Panel heard that the pilot scheme currently underway had the criteria that the applicants had to live and work in the area so that transport issues could be avoided.

Members debated the content of the report noting that the final decision on this was not within the gift of the Panel and that the distortion of the system through the affiliation had some beneficial outcomes but could lead to the system becoming unmanageable and that the results of the pilot scheme should be assessed before making a recommendation.

RESOLVED that the report is noted by the panel and that when the outcome of the pilot scheme is available then the panel will consider whether it should be returned to the Panel for further consideration.

Monitoring of the Council's performance relating to its Strategic Plan Action Plan and Key Performance Indicator Targets

The Scrutiny Panel reviews the Council's performance at regular intervals, receiving the following reports on the dates given:

Year End 2021/22 Performance Report and Strategic Plan Action Plan [5 July 2022]

The Panel noted and discussed the ongoing issues relating to the time to relet council residential properties. The Assistant Director (Corporate and Improvement) agreed that the past year had been particularly difficult, in part because of Covid-related delays to the eviction process, which had led to the properties involved being more badly damaged by the tenants, increasing dilapidation and therefore requiring longer remedial works. It was suggested that this could be raised with Colchester Borough Homes when they next appeared before the Panel.

RESOLVED that the Panel noted the report's contents and were assured as to the explanations given for missed targets, with the exception of the target for building of affordable homes, which would be discussed in a different item.

Year End April 2021 to March 2022 Performance Report 2020-2023 Strategic Plan Action Plan [5 July 2022]

Concern was voiced by one Panel member that the Plan, and its Action Plan, were too large and covered every operation undertaken by the Council, rather than showing a prioritisation. Priorities were hard to discern, given the breadth of the Plan. It was accepted that there would need to be a large Strategic Plan and Action Plan, to represent the work done by the Council, and with Full Council deciding upon the Plan, it was argued that Scrutiny Panel views on content and performance were important when setting and achieving targets. No recommendations were decided at this time, but the Chairman affirmed that the Panel would continue its monitoring and receive further progress reports.

RESOLVED that: -

- (a) Scrutiny Panel had confirmed satisfactory delivery against the Strategic Plan Action Plan and that the Council has made satisfactory progress in meeting its strategic goals;
- (b) Scrutiny Panel would conduct its usual mid-year scrutiny of progress and its normal monitoring activities through the municipal year.

Half Year 2022-23 Performance Report [13 December 2022]

Caution was given that, given the financial pressures, there was a need to examine budget consequences from where extremely high performance was achieved, and the opportunity cost of increasing performance in different areas. Panel members agreed with the importance of balancing performance achievements with the draw they required on officers and finances.

The Panel considered the performance indicators and it was noted that most of the 'red' KPI figures had been habitually so, and for understandable reasons. Performance on sickness leave was discussed, attributable to a number of reasons. The Panel accepted that the causes of sickness levels were not being ignored.

The Panel considered performance in collection of garden waste. It was suggested that not all residents could compost all garden waste. Richard Block, Chief Operating Officer, explained that collection of garden waste would become a statutory duty, via the Environment Act 2021, and that the Council would need to consider whether or not to charge for collections.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Panel has reviewed performance against Key Performance Indicators and, where Key Performance Indicators have not been met, ascertained that appropriate corrective action has been taken.

Strategic Plan Action Plan progress [13 December 2022]

The Panel considered the report and the Chairman noted that no major issues were evident within it, and that any recommendations to Cabinet should only be on major issues.

A Panel member highlighted that the inflation assumption for this year had been set at 2% and that the difference between assumption and reality had serious implications for the Council. The Council continued to do its best in very difficult circumstances, but it was impossible to provide the same services on a smaller income and with higher costs. An example given was Leisure World, where energy costs were much higher and income to the Council therefore lowered.

The Leader explained that the time lag between crises and effects meant that it was likely that effects of the 'cost of living crisis' would be reflected in the coming municipal year and the new Strategic Plan. The Council was just managing at present, but services at current levels could not continue indefinitely, with the Council mindful of the stresses on residents that council tax had.

The Panel agreed that, at present, there were no areas of concern on which it wished to make recommendations.

Partnership arrangements

During 2022-23, the Scrutiny Panel conducted the following reviews of subjects involving partnership working between the Council and other organisations.

Business cases of Town Deal Projects

The Scrutiny Panel spent much time reviewing and examining work occurring with partners on delivering the Town Deal projects. On 7 June 2022 the Panel discussed how best to do this, and laid out expectations for reporting and future scrutiny sessions.

On 8 November 2022, the Panel received a detailed report on the progress made on the different projects within the Town Deal. The Executive Director for Place presented the report to the Panel and explained that 14 projects were currently underway with eight being led by partners, but which were ultimately accountable to the Council. It was noted that there was a strong governance structure in place with a large amount of engagement on projects, most notably with Jumbo. The Panel heard that business cases had been submitted in March 2022 to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUC) and permission had been given to proceed in August 2022 with the initial funding being provided.

It was noted that the RAG risk approach was currently on amber as some of projects were very complex. The Executive Director for Place confirmed that the risks linked to the projects were reviewed on a continual basis with the main concerns being around escalating costs for labour as well as unexpected delays with supplies. The Panel heard that one of the largest risks was associated with the land acquisition in the heart of Greenstead but that there was no update to give on this. The panel were informed that the aim was to contain any cost issues and that there had been a contribution from Colchester Borough Council for St Nicolas Square which had accelerated the project however it was detailed that archaeology costs had risen. The projects were also being looked at in alignment to try and create efficiencies where it was possible.

The Executive Director for Place explained to the Panel that there was significant oversight of the works from the Town Deal Board and from the Section 151 Officer which had to report into DLUC every six months with progress of the projects. It was noted that there were no significant risks that would compromise the projects and outlined a range of details on each of the projects.

The Panel raised questions on the report and its emphasis upon deprivation and the areas that the projects were targeted and what evidence was there that they would materially affect deprivation in those areas. Questions were raised regarding the completed projects such as those at the Mercury Theatre and how these would contribute to ending deprivation as well as whether the projects that were being undertaken as they could be easily completed.

The Panel heard that the heart of Greenstead project was a £40 million investment which could make a significant difference and intervene to improve skills. It was noted that the Holy Trinity Church Scheme would be offering services to those who were most in need and the Cycling Hub helped provide transport for those who were on a lower income. The Panel heard that the proposals for the digital skills hub would help people to retrain and give them access to digital skills.

The Panel queried whether match funding was being sought on projects as this had been a key aim within the Fund and heard that additional funding was being sought wherever possible and elaborated that there had been an Active Travel fund of £5 million as well as a possible £5 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund. It was noted that Greenstead's match funding was also through Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which would provide long term regeneration of the area. Concern was raised by the Committee over the lack of key performance

indicators for the projects and match funding. The Economic Regeneration Manager responded that there were no specific requirements for match funding or additional funding but commented that as it was only 2 months into the delivery of the project other opportunities may become available. The Executive Director for Place advised Members that the Council would bid for any funding that arose and that a report could be brought back to the Panel on where additional funding was being sought.

Questions were raised from the Panel on the role of the signage changes for the City Status and it was confirmed that this was part of the City Status work plan and further information on this would be provided to the Committee.

A further question was raised regarding the Council's capital programme difficulties and whether it was linked to the Town Deal and would this cause issues for any of the projects. It was confirmed by officers that the review of the Capital Programme had started but outlined that the majority of the projects were not reliant on the programme and were funded.

Future updates were scheduled for the Panel to consider Town Deal progress, with the next update due at the Panel meeting on 15 March 2023.

Review of Arts Organisations in receipt of Council funding.

The Scrutiny Panel had previously held an annual session to hear from the local arts organisations which receive Council funding, namely The Mercury Theatre, FirstSite and the Colchester Arts Centre.

In 2022, the Panel decided to recommend that an all-councillor briefing be held on the work of the arts organisations, rather than a formal scrutiny session. This was in response to a change in the funding arrangements, which moved to a quadrennial awarding process for funding and away from an annual award.

One Colchester Partnership

In 2021-22, the Scrutiny Panel requested the opportunity to question officers of the Council and representatives of One Colchester Partnership and to scrutinise the governance and oversight arrangements introduced when the Safer Colchester Partnership was moved to fall under the oversight of the One Colchester Partnership. A scrutiny session for this was arranged for the Panel's meeting on 15 March 2022, however this was postponed until 2022-23. A wider session for the Panel to hear about and consider the full range of operations and governance arrangements for the Partnership was then arranged for the Panel's meeting on 14 March 2023.

Portfolio Holder Briefings

During 2022-23, the Scrutiny Panel scheduled the following briefings from members of the Cabinet, to be delivered at the Panel's meetings as shown below. Given a new Administration formed after the Borough Council elections held in May 2022, the Panel directed that these only be scheduled in the latter part of the municipal year, to allow Portfolio Holders time to settle in to their new positions:

- Briefing from Cllr Julie Young, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities [11 October 2022]
- Briefing from Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Local Economy and Transformation [13 December 2022]
- Briefing from Portfolio Holder for Resources [24 January 2023]
- Briefing from Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage [14 February 2023]
- Briefing by the Leader of the Council [14 February 2023]
- Briefing by Portfolio Holder for Planning and Infrastructure [14 March 2023]
- Briefing by Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services and Waste [15 March 2023]
- Briefing by Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability [15 March 2023]

These briefings were arranged for Portfolio Holders to provide an overview of the work ongoing within their remits, and the main challenges being faced. They also gave the Scrutiny Panel an opportunity to specify particular issues on which members might wish to conduct 'deep dive' scrutiny, going in to more detail. Particular focus was given to actions or work for which the Portfolio Holders were personally responsible.

Whilst these briefings were mainly to facilitate the ability for the Panel's information, they did allow for the Panel to make recommendations to Cabinet or individual Portfolio Holders, and to make resolutions. The following resolution was made on 24 January 2023, resulting from the briefing from the Portfolio Holder for Resources:

RESOLVED that the Head of Finance would circulate a confidential briefing note to members of Scrutiny Panel on the current financial position of the Turnstone project and any potential accounting issues in advance of Full Council's consideration of the Budget for 2023-24

The Panel duly received the necessary confidential briefing paper from the Section 151 Officer, which in turn led to the Panel scheduling an item for it to scrutinise the strip leasing arrangements within the Turnstone project. This was scheduled for confidential session [due to commercial sensitivity] at the Scrutiny Panel meeting on 15 March 2023.

The minutes covering the Portfolio Holder briefings above are available on the Council's website here: [: Colchester Borough Council \(cmis.uk.com\)](https://www.colchester.gov.uk/cmis).

Scrutiny Panel operating as Crime & Disorder Committee

The Scrutiny Panel was due to sit as the Crime and Disorder Committee to review the performance and operation of the Safer Colchester Partnership on 13 September 2022. This meeting was moved to 7 November 2022, as the original date fell within the period of national mourning for Her Late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II.

The review held by the Crime and Disorder Committee provided information on the work of the Safer Colchester Partnership during 2022-23, and provided updates from partner organisations covering their work over the year. Additional detail was given on work done to tackle priorities, such as reducing exploitation, 'hidden harms', domestic abuse and violence and tackling County Lines gangs.

The Committee conducted scrutiny of the work of the Police, discussing the approaches taken to address urban and rural crime and antisocial behaviour. This included use of the Strategic Policing Plan to address hotspots and use prevention methods to stop offences being committed. 27 County Lines gangs had been wound up in the 12 months leading up to this meeting and partnership working with other police services (including the Metropolitan Police) had yielded significant success. The Committee were told of the use of information/data by the Police to more-effectively target offenders and deal with offences.

Councillor Call for Action (CCfA)

There were no CCfA issues brought to the attention of Scrutiny Panel during 2022/23.

Task and Finish Groups

There were no Task and Finish Groups commissioned by the Scrutiny Panel 2023/23.

Appendix

Appendix A – Schedule of Meetings and Reviews for 2022/23.

Schedule of meetings and reviews

Scrutiny Panel 2022/23

Councillor Willetts (Chairman)*, Councillor Lissimore (Deputy Chairman)*,
Councillor Laws, Councillor Lilley, Councillor McCarthy, Councillor Scordis, Councillor Smith.

7 June 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work Programme 2022-23 • Town Deal Reporting
5 July 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council's disbursement of rebate payments on Council Tax • Year End 2021/22 Performance Report and Strategic Plan Action Plan • Housing Strategy • Annual Scrutiny Report • Briefing note on Hythe Flooding • Recap report on previous Scrutiny Panel reviews of local bus services • Work Programme 2022-23
16 August 2022	Meeting cancelled due to lack of business [caused by deferral of items to later meetings]
13 September 2022 (Crime and Disorder Committee)	Meeting postponed until 7 November 2022 due to the period of national mourning for Her Late Majesty
11 October 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefing from Cllr Julie Young, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities • Economic Growth Strategy Deferred • Review of Colchester Borough Homes: 2021-22 Performance, and discussion of Key Performance Indicator Targets for '23-24 • Work Programme 2022-23
7 November 2022 (Crime and Disorder Committee)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safer Colchester Partnership (Crime and Disorder Committee)
8 November 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update on Town Deal projects' progress • Family/local affiliation in letting and/or sale of local affordable housing and Gateway to Homechoice Allocations Policy • Work Programme 2022-23

13 December 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefing by Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Local Economy and Transformation • Draft Economic Strategy [Was due to come before Scrutiny Panel on 16 August 2022 and then 11 October 2022 but delayed to 13 December 2022] • Half Year 2022-23 Performance Report • Strategic Plan Action Plan progress • Local Council Tax Support – Year 2023/24 • Work Programme 2022-23
16 January 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer Challenge Review report and action plan • Work Programme 2022-23
24 January 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefing by Portfolio Holder for Resources [focus on Budget 2023-24] • Budget Strategy for 2023-24 • 2023-24 Revenue Budget, Capital Programme, Medium Term Financial Forecast and Treasury Management Investment Strategy • Housing Revenue Accounts Estimate and Housing Investment Programme • Work Programme 2022-23
14 February 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefing by Portfolio Holder for Culture and Heritage • Briefing by the Leader of the Council • Corporate Key Performance Indicator Targets for 2022-23. Deferred due to drafting of new Strategic Plan • Work Programme 2022-23
3 March 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call in of decision taken by the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services and Waste – ‘Review of Saturday Household Drop-off Service’
14 March 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefing by Portfolio Holder for Planning and Infrastructure • Collection of Section 106 developer contributions • One Colchester Partnership • Scrutiny Panel Annual Report • Work Programme 2022-23

15 March 2023

- Briefing by Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services and Waste
- Briefing by Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability
- Town Deal projects progress report
- City Status Programme