

Policy and Public Initiatives Panel

Wednesday, 09 January 2019

Attendees: Councillor Roger Buston, Councillor Dave Harris, Councillor Chris Hayter, Councillor Andrea Luxford Vaughan, Councillor Lee Scordis, Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell
Substitutes: Councillor Beverly Davies (for Councillor Sue Lissimore)
Also Present:

18 Minutes of 7 November 2018

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2018 were confirmed as a correct record.

19 Have Your Say!

James Dean addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He voiced his serious concerns about proposals to pedestrianise the High Street on the basis that it was a through route, there was no alternative route for buses, nearby roads were too narrow, the Roman style street network, difficulties for deliveries and there was no link road or ring road. He referred to the experiment in 2013 which had not been successful and was of the view that the High Street needed to revert to two lanes in order to improve congestion.

Mark Goacher addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He asked for an updates on two matters he had raised at previous meetings of the Panel - the Council's use of the pesticide, glyphosate and progress on the introduction of alternative forms of weed management and investigations into the cause of the recent increase in air pollution levels in Brook Street. He also referred to the need for improvements at St Botolph's Priory which was currently not easily accessible to visitors and asked the Panel to consider potential enhancements.

In response to Mr Goacher, Councillor Goss reported that he was aware that the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities was investigating other options were as alternatives to glysohate, along with associated financial implications and he would ask the Portfolio Holder to contact him directly with further information. He explained that a group had been set up to look into anti-social behaviour issues related to St Botolph's Priory and that the Council's Heritage and Tourism Task and Finish Group may consider adding this to its work programme. He also confirmed that the air quality levels recorded in Colchester were improving but that the recent increases in levels in Brook Street were

being investigated further.

Jackie White addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). She referred to her experiences following her claim for Employment and Support Allowance in 2016, in particular the inaccessibility of the test centre for work capability assessments, the subsequent stopping of payments for assessment non-attendance and her difficulties in coping with her financial situation. She had also not been awarded Job Seekers Allowance and was awaiting a reassessment of her Personal Independence Payment entitlement. She considered the state system to be abusive and an example of coercive control.

The Chairman thanked the speakers and hoped the Department for Work and Pensions and the Council's Welfare Rights Team would assist in resolving Jackie White's problems.

20 Public Initiatives

Ali Wilkin addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). She referred to legal aid and the child support agency which had enabled her, 18 years previously, to leave an abusive marriage and the fact that these support systems were no longer available. She also explained that accessible refuge rooms were virtually non-existent for disabled people. She considered the state system to be abusive and an example of coercive control. She was of the view that the Government's incentivisation to work measures were inappropriate for people with disabilities and that work assessment practices and appeals were discriminatory. She was concerned about the standard of adult social care in Essex, citing the removal of social workers and the premature closure of cases when mental health issues remained outstanding. She asked for the Council, as part of its due diligence responsibilities for the consideration of moving to a Unitary Authority status, to conduct a Cumulative Impact Assessment on the effect of austerity on working age disabled adults.

The Chairman confirmed that the Panel would consider the request as part of its review of the Panel's work programme later in the meeting.

21 Colchester High Street Pedestrianisation

The Panel considered a report by the Assistant Director Policy and Corporate giving details of the background for a discussion of proposals for pedestrianisation or traffic reduction in Colchester High Street.

Rachel Forkin, Transport and Sustainability Manager, presented the report and responded to members questions.

Also in attendance to assist the Panel members in their discussion were Alan Lindsay, Essex County Council's Transportation Planning and Infrastructure Manager, Councillor Kevin Bentley in his capacity as Essex County Council's Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Councillor Martin Goss, Portfolio Holder for Waste, Environment and Transportation.

The Transport and Sustainability Manager explained that the potential for managing traffic in Colchester High Street had been the subject of discussion for a number of years. Most recently the removal of all non-essential traffic from the High Street had been taken forward in 2013 with experimental traffic regulation orders (TROs) being introduced. The scheme was between the hours of 11am and 6pm, although buses, taxis, private hire vehicles, motor cycles and cycles were allowed to access at all times. A revised version of the scheme was introduced in October 2013 limited to:

- 24 hour bus lane on North Hill (southbound carriageway)
- 24 hour bus lane on Middleborough (right turn to North Hill)
- 24 hour bus lane on High Street (right turn to Queen Street)
- 24 hour vehicle prohibition on Cowdray Crescent.

These elements were later made permanent with the aim of reducing the appeal of the High Street as a through route for general traffic and therefore reduce traffic volume in the High Street.

In advance of agreeing any future scheme for pedestrianisation or traffic reduction objectives, a vision for the High Street would need to be agreed and potential schemes would need to be informed by best practice and further study work. Baseline data, including air quality, footfall, cycling levels, public transport use and public transport journey time, would also need to be collected against which to measure the impact of changes. Potential benefits were:

- Improvements to air quality;
- Improvements to the pedestrian environment:
 - Easier to cross the road;
 - Boost café culture
 - Make the market environment more attractive;
- Improved Public Transport reliability;
- Improved connections for pedestrians and cyclists into and across the town centre;
- Modal shift to more sustainable means of transport;
- Potential increased footfall and spending.

Potential impacts included:

- Difficulty balancing the needs of different users including pedestrians, businesses, deliveries, local residents;
- Providing alternative arrangements for buses and taxis if they can no longer pick up passengers on the High Street;
- Access to and availability of Blue Badge parking;

- Traffic displacement and increased traffic volumes on roads around the town centre;
- Impact on traffic and residents in the Dutch Quarter;
- Impact on deliveries.

It was highlighted that pedestrianisation could take different forms and be implemented in different ways, such as the removal of all vehicular traffic, giving priority to pedestrians, removal of non-essential traffic and traffic reduction. The report included a series of scenarios to aid initial discussion and explore different options. Essex and Colchester Councils were working in partnership to develop a Transport Strategy for Colchester, setting out a vision for Transport to 2033, in line with the Local Plan. Background data was being collected and consultation on objectives and issues was expected for early 2019. It would be important to ensure continuity between the Transport Strategy work and a traffic reduction project.

The next steps for a traffic reduction project were outlined, proposing the appointment of consultants to undertake early public consultation with all those having an interest in access to the High Street, with initial views being sought on whether the High Street could be pedestrianised and options for how this could be achieved as well as prior engagement with interested groups including Transport for Colchester, local businesses and residents, access groups, walking and cycling groups, bus operators and taxi operators. If the consultation indicated support for implementing a project, work would be undertaken with partners and interested groups to carefully plan further details including access rights.

The Transportation Planning and Infrastructure Manager referred to the need to identify the vision and objectives of a project and for the adoption of a partnership approach, not only with interested groups but also across the two local authorities. He gave further details of the previous scheme introduced in 2013 and the impact of the TROs which had been put in place. He referred to the monitoring group which had been established to gather views and feedback, including footfall, public perception, air quality and public transport. He agreed that it was important to establish the objectives early in the project and to learn from previous experiences.

The Chairman explained that the Panel was not a decision making body, its role was to listen to opinions and concerns about the issue and to make recommendations to the Cabinet for consideration.

Sir Bob Russell addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He explained that he lived close to the town centre area and supported the views expressed by Mr Dean. He urged the Council not to disturb the equilibrium of the town centre. He acknowledged the reported support for a pedestrianisation scheme but was of the view that the many disadvantages would outweigh any benefits. He referred to the difficulties due to the location of the town

centre on a hill and within Roman walls with only two of the four gates allowing vehicular access. He considered 75% of the town centre was already pedestrianised, whilst the High Street had already been reduced to a one lane highway with footways of very generous proportions. He was concerned about detriment to businesses and public services and was of the view that measures to reduce traffic further would have a negative impact on traffic problems on Cowdray Avenue and Magdalen Street.

Sarah Shehadeh addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). She supported the views of Sir Bob Russell in terms of the existing levels of pedestrianisation and the location of the town centre on a hill. She considered the current arrangement in the High Street worked well as it was not difficult to cross, unlike Head Street. She was also concerned about the impact on bus services.

Nick Chilvers addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He considered the report to be balanced and identified the complexities of the issues. He was of the view that interested groups such as, resident groups, bus operators and taxis, needed to be consulted as well as the independent retailers and national chains. He considered all retailers would be able to cope and manage changes with time but he warned that changes to bus stops would impact on older residents, they may opt to shop elsewhere and this would have a considerable negative impact on trade. He was of the view that consultation needed to include residents living above shops and food establishments and that the market should not be allowed to dominate opinions. He considered the consultation needed to be well publicised, to not include a list of questions and sufficient time needed to be allocated.

Julian Elliott, representing First Essex Buses addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He acknowledged the aspiration for a strong local economy and concerns about high levels of congestion and air quality issues but he explained that it was important that access for buses into the town centre was maintained. The bus services operated a cross town pattern and if buses were not able to access the High Street this would have a knock on effect on the operation and cost of the services. Experience from High Street closure days had demonstrated that bus patronage decreased with an associated negative effect on traders. He urged consideration be given to buses being permitted to serve the High Street to allow residents to access facilities and support the local economy. He argued that buses were the best use of road space and most efficient mover of people and disturbance to bus access would create a need for infrastructure elsewhere which may prove difficult to accommodate. He confirmed that First Bus was very keen to work constructively with the local authorities to find the most suitable solution to enable to get into the heart of the town centre and were very willing to engage in any part of the process.

The Chairman welcomed the support for the process from Mr Elliott and asked whether bus service punctuality was likely to improve should other vehicles be excluded from the town centre.

In response Mr Elliott confirmed reduced congestion in the town centre had the potential to improve punctuality but this was subject to reduced congestion across the wider area.

Stuart Johnson, on behalf of Colchester Cycling Campaign addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He explained that Colchester Cycling Campaign welcomed measures to limit the amount of motor traffic in the town centre as it would improve the town centre through the encouragement of more walking, cycling and the use of public transport. He also acknowledged due consideration needed to be made for access to be maintained for people with disabilities. He reported that measures seeking to encourage walking and cycling had been shown to improve commercial outcomes. He was of the view that whatever scheme was adopted in the future it needed to include provision for bi-directional access for cyclists on the High Street. He welcomed the opportunity to participate constructively in future consultation.

Robbie Spence addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He welcomed the report, supported traffic restrictions rather than outright pedestrianisation with a preference for no private cars and trade vehicles only out of hours only but allowance for buses, taxis, Dutch Quarter residents and two way access for cyclists. He suggested rising bollards with number plate recognition, together with a 5mph speed limit in order to create a more pleasant and safer area for pedestrians.

Alan Short addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He considered better things could be done with the High Street and cited Durham City centre which was pedestrianised but also built on a hill and surrounded by a river. He was supportive of improvements to the public transport system and vehicle control. He was concerned about the current cost of bus fares and the chaotic system operated by different bus companies and the need for improvements to bring incentives for people to choose not to use their cars. He supported a comprehensive plan including maintained access to the town centre for people with disabilities, the whole town centre becoming as car free as possible and the introduction of congestion zones.

Ken Walker addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He considered the High Street to be the beating heart of Colchester and fundamental to the future health of the town. He was of the view that the council needed to determine its goals and objectives to support the High Street to ensure that the businesses and communities prospered and that these needed to be set out in a plan alongside one for pedestrianisation. He suggested each step in the process needed to be assessed relative to those objectives and that the objectives needed to be formally articulated and shared together with the practicalities and strategies to address issues or problems. He was particularly concerned that resources should not be wasted

until these preliminary steps had been taken. He further suggested that measures to assess the success of the process needed to be put in place and adjustments made if things went wrong. He referred to scepticism about other measures such as work at Ipswich Road and considered that objectives needed to be understood by residents and fully publicised using local media.

Robin Webb addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He explained that he was a Chartered Civil Engineer living in the Dutch Quarter and commended the previous speaker. He had been disillusioned with previous schemes because of lack of feedback and co-ordination. He explained the problem for residents of the Dutch Quarter who could only access the area from the bottom of North Hill and the need for traffic to be spread out. He considered the congestion would be worse if the High Street was pedestrianised. He advocated the determination of an overall objective for the scheme, fully supported and thought out, referring to a previous scheme which had identified accident reduction but with poor evidence to support this.

Brian Lewes addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He was the proprietor of a cycle shop in St John's Street. He referred to congestion which he attributed to the restriction of traffic through the town centre and the prevention of traffic getting out of the town centre. He advocated the re-introduction of two lanes in the High Street and the widening of Head Street to enable access round buses. He was also concerned about the closure of Queen Street from the High Street and the congestion caused by circuitous routes around the town and the associated air pollution from stationary vehicles. He supported access to the town centre to enable people to get in and out of the town quickly and was of the view that pedestrianisation would kill off the town centre. He also supported the construction of a ring road.

Bodo von Broen addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He was a resident of the Dutch Quarter and considered it imperative that the High Street was pedestrianised in order to improve safety in the town centre road network. He referred to the pedestrianisation of Chelmsford and Ipswich which had improved business in these town centres. He did not consider there was sufficient footfall in Colchester and the market was suffering detrimentally. He considered it would be easy to achieve by moving deliveries to the early part of the morning and traffic could be diverted as was the case at weekends.

Barbara Patterson addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). She welcomed non-pedestrianisation and referred to people opting to shop out of town due to the cost of car parking. She considering it important to reduce business rates to encourage smaller independent shops and could not see any justification to restrict vehicles in the town centre.

Rowena Macaulay addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). She spoke in support of inclusive access, the impact on blue badge holders, disabled and older users' of public transport and shared spaces. She spoke in a personal capacity and on behalf of Walk Colchester, an organisation concerned with the creation of attractive and safe walking environments for all and to be inclusive. She was not representing Fair Access to Colchester. She was not in principle against full or part pedestrianisation and had followed debates on shared space for some time. She was not sure that it would well in Colchester, particularly in relation to the relocation of disabled parking spaces in close proximity to the town centre. She was of the view that in 2013, discussions had been premised on a decision which had already been taken, which was for the removal of all cars from the High Street. She did not consider this to be a good way to start a meaningful consultation and hoped this would not be repeated. She explained that many people relied on public transport and were, by reason of their disability, from lower socio-economic groups. She acknowledged that buses were poor in terms of emissions and often ran intermittently but they did have capacity to bring large numbers of people right into the town centre. She also acknowledged that shared space was a contentious issue and she referred to a petition to stop all moves towards shared space pending further research being undertaken was being presented to the Government jointly by the National Federation of Disabled People, Transport for All and the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

David Harper addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He referred to his former home town of Newport in Monmouthshire which had been a thriving town but had significantly deteriorating following the pedestrianisation of the town centre. He explained his regret at the change to a town he had loved and warned against this happening to Colchester.

Councillor Luxford Vaughan referred to the problem of air pollution, asked about progress with the introduction of electric buses, whether there were any funds to assist bus companies with this and how this impacted the plans for Rapid Transport Systems for new planned developments. She was of the view that the problem of air pollution would only be moved to a different location and that measures needed to be pursued to actively improve vehicle emissions. She was also not convinced that the objectives of a pedestrianisation scheme would adequately assist retailers.

The Chairman suggested that the subject of electric buses might best be deferred to the Panel's discussion on Sustainable Transport which was due to take place at the next meeting.

The Transport and Sustainability Manager acknowledged the need for all modes of transport to be looked at if one of the objectives of a future project was the improvement in air quality. She confirmed that Rapid Transport plans would need to be looked at in conjunction with any pedestrianisation planning. She indicated that she would need to investigate further the issue of subsidies for electric buses.

Councillor Scott-Boutell referred to partnership funding and the ratio of resources which was being allocated to support this project. She asked for consideration to be given to the introduction of electric hopper buses to open up the town centre for all.

Councillor Goss confirmed that there was a budget allocation of £120,000 but the intention was for funds to be allocated in stages, starting with a consultation followed by an assessment of project viability. Any implementation of a scheme would need approval from Essex County Council as Highway Authority and he confirmed that he had been working closely with Councillor Bentley, in his capacity as Essex County Council Cabinet Member for Infrastructure towards the creation of a Transport strategy for Colchester. He acknowledged the need for all interested groups to be involved in the process and that lessons had been learnt from the experience in 2013. He also confirmed that no measures would be taken prior to undertaking a consultation exercise.

Councillor Buston welcomed the report and the contributions made by members of the public. He considered the current traffic restrictions in the town centre had brought problems as well as benefits. He acknowledged the need for the High Street to continue to thrive but did not consider this was entirely dependent on pedestrianisation or otherwise. He agreed with the suggestion for a comprehensive plan to be formulated and acknowledged the specific characteristics of Colchester which made it difficult to compare to other towns. He also acknowledged the references to congestion and the view that the town needed to be opened up rather than closed down to traffic. He was concerned about the cost of any further pedestrianisation proposals and was of the view that additional resources should not be utilised for this purpose at this time.

Councillor Harris strongly welcomed the partnership approach to the project, the intention to consult widely and the intention to work in a staged arrangement. He acknowledged that previous initiatives had not been implemented appropriately and was of the view that wide consultation was imperative. He was concerned about the potential for air pollution problems to be moved rather than eliminated and the additional cost to businesses of out of hours deliveries.

The Chairman invited Councillor Bentley to address the Panel in his capacity as Essex Cabinet member for Infrastructure. Councillor Bentley welcomed the opportunity to hear the views expressed by the public and to participate in the meeting. He referred to the subject of pedestrianisation being considered on numerous occasions over the time he had lived in the Borough and that the population of the town had increased from 94,000 to 190,000 in that time. He considered the matter related to the whole network of roads in the town centre not just the High Street and commented that Colchester High Street was one of very few through High Streets in East Anglia. He did not consider the location of the town on a hill and between Roman walls was a matter of significance. He advocated an approach to the project which sought to identify what was trying to be achieved and what it was that people wanted the town centre and the High Street to be and what it was that people wanted the town centre to look like in 50 years' time. He

considered many things to be possible but questioned what things would be acceptable. He also referred to measures to reduce air pollution and improve congestion and advocated involving all interested groups in the process.

The Chairman invited Sam Good, from Colchester Business Improvement District (BID) to address the Panel. Mr Good explained that the BID was a business led body and its boundaries were wider than just the High Street. He acknowledged the need to consider what the future would be for the town centre and for the reasons for part or complete pedestrianisation to be identified. He confirmed that the BID would be very willing to participate in the process on behalf of businesses in the town centre.

The Chairman invited Councillor Cory, Leader of the Council to address the Panel. Councillor Cory attended the meeting and, with the consent of the Chairman addressed the Committee. He explained that he had been encouraged by the representations which had come forward and considered it was the start of a process which would involve many people and interested groups. He acknowledged the need for a framework for the process to be established and welcomed the helpful comments made by Councillors Goss and Bentley. He was very supportive of the Panel accepting responsibility for progressing the project and for work to be undertaken to determine whether pedestrianisation might contribute to the revitalisation of the High Street. He invited Councillor Bentley to clarify the support available from the County Council to address congestion issues and warmly welcomed the work being undertaken towards the creation of a Transport Strategy for Colchester. He also acknowledged the importance of clarifying what people wanted the town centre to look like.

Councillor Bentley explained that the transportation work was not just in relation to the High Street but that it encompassed transportation issues for the whole of Colchester, the focus of the work being in relation to increasing traffic and how the associated congestion issues could be dealt with. This may also involve how the displacement of traffic, by pedestrianisation, is dealt with and how more sustainable alternatives can be considered.

Councillor Goss acknowledged the issues identified by Councillor Bentley. He confirmed that the model identified for Chelmsford was being looked at with a view to producing a masterplan for transport for Colchester. He confirmed that consultation was planned on what the future for transport in Colchester would look like.

Councillor Davies voiced her concern that discussion about potential implementation of a pedestrianisation scheme was premature and that work needed to be undertaken on the options and implications as an initial step in the process.

Councillor Scott- Boutell referred to the items of business contained in the Panel's work programme and suggested that the business encompassing sustainable transport, air quality and pedestrianisation were all inter-related and there were merits in looking at all

of these subjects holistically. She supported the proposal that all options and implications for Colchester High Street needed to be given due consideration.

Councillor Harris was also of the view that various opinions had been presented at the meeting and that it was important that consideration be given to the various options.

The Chairman thanked the members of the public for their attendance and their contributions. He referred to the plans for a transport masterplan for Colchester, mentioned by Councillors Goss and Bentley and the need for the process for the High Street to identify what was wanted in the first instance. He agreed that opinions had been expressed at the Panel's meeting but these may not be representative of the reviews of residents of Colchester generally. He welcomed the opportunity for the Panel to undertake, on behalf of the Cabinet, the process of identifying objectives by means of a thorough consultation exercise and determining the next steps on options for the High Street.

Councillor Cory was of the view that the progress made at this meeting had been encouraging but he considered a wider debate needed to be facilitated to ensure the widest spectrum of views could be forthcoming. He welcomed the Panel's willingness to continue with the work, subject to the other work commitments of the Panel, and considered it was likely that support from the Cabinet would be forthcoming for the Panel to progress the next steps of the process.

Dan Gascoyne, the Assistant Director Policy and Corporate, explained that work had commenced with other groups in the town centre on formulating a bid for submission to the Government for the Future High Streets Fund and that, whilst there were other locations which may be more economically challenged, this could assist with the issues discussed at this meeting as well as the wider vision for the town centre heritage issues. He confirmed that the submission could be for funding in the order of £3 to £5 million, the deadline for expressions of interest was towards the end of March 2019 and, as such, it may be possible to update the Panel at its next meeting.

RESOLVED that the report and background information on Colchester High Street, together with the subsequent discussion be noted.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that approval be given to the Panel to progress the next steps regarding options for Colchester High Street, including agreeing objectives, gathering baseline data and consultation with all stakeholders and the public.

22 Unitary Authority Status

The Committee considered a report by the Assistant Director Policy and Corporate giving details of the implications of unitary authority status and recent announcements by Government regarding future policy direction in relation to local authority reorganisation.

Victoria Weaver addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). She supported the principle of unitary authority status for Colchester and thanked the Panel for agreeing to consider the report on the options available. She referred to the expanse and diversity of Essex as a County and that Colchester was one of the fastest growing towns and considered Colchester could stand on its own. She referred to the possibility of a North Essex Authority with Colchester combining with Braintree or Tendring. She gave the example of the NHS already operating as a North Essex Region and highlighted the benefits of having greater control over the Local Plan with devolved powers. She considered it would be easier for residents to understand, there would be cost savings and elected representatives would be living in the local community. Partnership working would enable more ambitious plans to be pursued. She acknowledged the potential advantage of waiting until the Government's consultation on neo-localism had been concluded.

Andrew Weavers, presented the report and responded to members questions. He explained that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government had recently announced an emerging policy which would set out a direction for devolution following Brexit and this included an intention to consult on a new devolution model in which he could invite reorganisation proposals in due course. The Government was looking for innovation in service delivery and structures that would benefit a wider area, highlighted by the mergers of district councils in Suffolk which had primarily merged to enable financial savings and more cost effective service delivery. If Colchester were to consider making an application for unitary authority status it would most certainly have to do this with one or more of its neighbouring authorities in order to achieve the cost benefits and service delivery efficiencies required.

The report provided details of the advantages and disadvantages of unitary authority status and provided information on the different routes available as well as examples of partnership working between Colchester Council, other neighbouring authorities and non-local authorities.

It was explained that the minimum population size to be considered for unitary status was 300,000 but it was not encouraged for populations over 700,000. This would mean it would be necessary for Colchester to combine with either Tendring or Braintree but not with both.

Councillor Laws welcomed the cross authority working on the parking partnership and referred to the confusion experienced by members of the public in relation to the division of responsibilities between district and county councils.

The Chairman invited Councillor Cory, Leader of the Council to address the Panel. He was supportive of the unitary concept and welcomed the opportunity for Colchester to consider the issue again. He highlighted the benefit of one body having authority to

make decisions without having to seek the support of another, although he acknowledged there were now good examples of cross border working between Colchester and neighbouring local authorities, particularly in relation to the Local Plan. He considered there were many positives to the idea and welcomed the panel's consideration of the issues.

Councillor Buston welcomed the report acknowledging that members of the public did not find it easy to understand the distinction between the borough and county councils. He was of the view that a larger unitary body status would give Colchester far more influence but that it would be necessary to submit a bid in partnership with one or two of our neighbours in order to gain approval. He referred to the immediate cost savings in moving to four yearly elections and that he had not supported the recent reduction in the number of Borough Councils from 60 to 51.

Councillor Harris was supportive of a bid for unitary status as he considered this would be beneficial for residents and improved economies of scale.

Councillor Davies was concerned about the prematurity of any decisions on the issue, given the forthcoming consultation exercise by the government and was of the view the issue should be reviewed at a later date.

The Chairman was of the view that merging with other local authorities such as Braintree or Tendring may lead to the diminution of concerns for the people of Colchester, given the differing characteristics of the areas concerned. As such he was not supportive of a combined bid for unitary status, favouring the submission of a special case for Colchester on its own.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted and the Monitoring Officer be requested to submit a further report to the Panel on all of the options to progress a case for Colchester Borough Council to seek an altered authority status/structure when the outcome of the consultation on a new devolution model by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has been published.

23 Policy and Public Initiatives Panel Work Programme 2018-19

The Committee considered a report by the Assistant Director Policy and Corporate giving details of the Panel's Work Programme, updated since the last meeting.

The Panel had three matters of business for consideration (Sustainable Transport; Business Improvement District - enhancing the walls in the town centre; Responsible Dog Owners Policy) and needed to confirm whether it would be feasible to include each of these at the Panel's next meeting in March, which would be the last meeting in the current municipal year.

The Chairman confirmed that Councillor Scott-Boutell had offered to discuss the matter of responsible dog ownership with the Environmental Protection Manager with a view to this being scheduled for consideration by the Panel in the new municipal year.

The Chairman also referred to the matter raised by Ali Wilkin as a potential new idea/initiative for the Panel, namely for the Panel to conduct a Cumulative Impact Assessment on the effect of austerity on working age disabled adults. He was aware that the council had already undertaken work on the impact of Universal Credit and accordingly proposed that this be included in the Panel's work programme for consideration in the new municipal year, with the emphasis being on how the Council's welfare team can help residents who are suffering or feel they are being forgotten.

Councillor Laws asked the Panel to consider facilitating an open discussion about the River Colne. He considered the river was underutilised from a social sporting point of view and referred to a forthcoming planning application at East Bay and the obstacles when using the river to make the journey from Colchester town centre to Wivenhoe. He asked for the Panel to consider the issue in the context of encouraging more healthy lifestyles

Councillor Buston referred to the Wivenhoe Trail and speculated why this couldn't be extended from the Hythe and the need to make more of this stretch of the river.

Councillor Luxford Vaughan supported the views expressed in relation to the navigation of the river but she also referred to problems associated with jet ski use and the management responsibilities associated with them. She also referred to wildlife and the impact of the Local Plan and the need for mitigation measures.

Councillor Harris supported the proposal made by Councillor Laws to encourage greater use of the river as well as the wildlife concerns expressed by Councillor Luxford Vaughan.

RESOLVED that the work programme be amended to reflect the following changes:

- (i) Sustainable Transport and Business Improvement District - enhancing the walls in the town centre continue to be scheduled for consideration at the Panel's next meeting in March 2019;
- (ii) Next steps in options for Colchester High Street be scheduled for the Panel's next meeting in March 2019;
- (iii) Responsible Dog Ownership Policy be re-scheduled for consideration early in the new municipal year.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that approval be given for the following items to be included in the Panel's work programme at an appropriate time in the new municipal year:

- (i) The impact of Universal Credit / Austerity;
- (ii) The use of the River Colne in terms of encouraging more effective use from environmental and activity aspects.