

Environment and Sustainability Panel

7 December 2021

Present: Councillor Mark Cory
Councillor Peter Chillingworth
Councillor David King
Councillor Lee Scordis
Councillor Julie Young

Substitutes: None.

46. Minutes of the previous meeting

Councillor Young observed that the use of glysohpate weed killer remained of interest to Colchester residents, and questions had been raised about both the Council's tree planting strategy and the provision of secure cycle parking in the town centre.

RESOLVED that: the minutes of the meetings held on 23 September 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

47. Have Your Say!

The Panel had received a written representation from Councillor G. Oxford, which was read out by Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer. Councillor Oxford made reference to the recent Conference of the Parties (COP26) meeting, and suggested that the deforestation of Highwoods Country Park should be reversed with the planting of 3,000 trees on the bottom meadow being considered. This would help to reduce pollution and increase tree canopy percentages.

48. Social Value Portal and Green Procurement

Samantha Preston, Group Manager - Customer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel heard that although Colchester Borough Council (the Council) had made a commitment to driving social value through the use of the Social Value Portal (the Portal), progress to date had been limited, although the Portal itself was of some use. It was felt that there was significant opportunity for improvement in the processes that the Council used. A significant and detailed review was being carried out into every element of the Council's procurement process, to determine where improvements could be made. All current suppliers would form part of this review to assess the progress currently being made towards providing social value, sustainability and carbon reduction. The

Panel were advised that of key importance to future progress was how businesses were engaged with, and consideration was being given to carrying out a consultation with local businesses to determine obstacles which may exist preventing businesses providing services to the Council, and how these obstacles could be overcome in the future. It was recognised that Officers needed to be supported in looking for the provision of social value when carrying out procurement, and training programmes and improved communications were being considered in this regard. The creation of better tools was being considered which would improve efficiency within the procurement processes, and allow the Council's procurement activities to be tracked and monitored more clearly, leading to a significant impact on the measurement of the social value that was being achieved. It was intended that some quick changes could be achieved in the short term, and that fuller proposals for the future would be referred to the Panel in the future which would include proposals on the use of local suppliers and employers, and work was ongoing with a number of partner organisations to support this. It was also intended that potential suppliers be asked to look at how they proposed to reduce their environmental impact, whether by carbon reduction, reduced waste or investment in new technology. The aim of the revision was to produce a new, clear, system which made the provision of social value integral to the procurement process and which ensured that a commitment towards social value and environmental sustainability was included in the contracts that the Council offered as a matter of course.

Councillor Chillingworth enquired whether the Council undertook joint procurement alongside other local authorities, and if so, how the use of the Portal fitted in with this approach. The Panel was advised that a number of other Essex authorities used the Portal, and several partnership groups existed which considered the use of joint procurement, although there was scope for making more use of the potential advantages of joint procurement strategies. The Council was committed to working with other authorities, including Essex County Council, to seek best value, and a new staff member had been appointed to support this.

Councillor King noted how difficult it was to change a buying and supply culture, and registered his concern that unless early progress could be achieved, then the project may struggle to deliver real change. The Panel heard that the provision of social value had been under consideration for over a year, and Councillor King requested that a specific timeline be provided in order to evidence that changes that were being achieved and the impact that they were having.

Samantha Preston advised the Panel that the complexity of the work that was being carried out made it difficult to provide a precise timeline of progress, but assurance was offered that the necessary work was being undertaken to analyse the process at both a strategic and local level. Existing contracts were being examined to determine where there were shortfalls in terms of the social value and sustainability that was being offered, with a view to improving the process in the future. Some of the larger contracts were also being examined, together with other key areas of purchasing, and there would be a timeline for strategic changes. However, it was also intended that the Council's current spend would be examined to ensure that social value was being delivered in the short term which was expected to yield demonstrable results. The Panel were assured that there was a clear commitment to implementing the necessary changes to the entire procurement structure, and a clear programme of

work would be drafted in the future which could be referred back to the Panel to provide more clarity and detail. The Panel suggested that it may be appropriate to ensure that prospective suppliers were aware of the Council's intentions so that they would make the necessary preparations.

Councillor Cory acknowledged the importance of the work, and reminded the Panel that there had been some recent examples of including social value in Council projects such as the Mercury Theatre, the provision of Council housing stock via Colchester Borough Homes, and the establishing of an internal I.T department as opposed to using an external supplier. He noted that the monitoring of social value was in use in respect of contracts with a value of over £100,000, but he wondered whether there was the potential for following the process for contracts of lesser value to ensure that smaller contracts were dealt with in the most ethical way so that the proposed culture was supported as fully as possible. Samantha confirmed to the Panel that this approach was being considered, and it was intended to streamline processes to enable procurement staff to be able to focus on who the best suppliers may be for any of the Council's spend on any goods or services.

Councillor Chillingworth observed that difficult decisions may have to be made in the future, noting that some of the lower tenders that may be received may not necessarily be the most ethical, would these sort of difficult decisions be delegated to Cabinet to make? Councillor Young advised the Panel that in her experience as a County Councillor, tenders had been evaluated on fixed percentages of price and social value elements. The Panel heard that the exact levels that may be proposed would form part of any future scheme, although consideration may also be given to the value that may be applied to whether any tender delivered social value or was made by a particularly environmentally conscious company.

RESOLVED that: the proposed next steps in relation to improving social value, implementing performance measures and monitoring impact be agreed.

49. Climate Emergency Action Plan Update

Rosie Welch, Air Quality and Community Engagement Officer, attended the meeting to provide the Panel with an update on the air quality work which had been undertaken. The Panel heard that in 2019 funding had been received from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to fund a behaviour change project which aimed to reduce pollution in Colchester to make the air cleaner and healthier, with a focus on the Air Quality Management areas of the town. The project had four main objectives;

1. Raise awareness of air pollution and its health impacts
2. Encourage the widespread adoption of switching off the engine when parked at junctions and level crossings
3. To work with four schools and a resident community to encourage walking and cycling for short journeys
4. To build the capacity of local volunteer group Clean Air Colchester, by identifying community champions to ensure the project continues once the funding had finished

Over 3,000 residents, schools and businesses had been consulted about pollution and the impact of air quality on health, and the findings from this consultation had been used to shape the project leading to three main areas of focus including roadside signage, working with residents and schools and the Council's 'no idling' campaign.

Roadside signage had been installed in Brook Street and at East Gates inviting motorists to turn off their engines while waiting, and data had been recorded over the past few months to monitor how many car engines were switched off. Over 69,000 vehicles had been counted and a 9% increase in engine switch offs had been recorded. The signage had been removed for a couple of weeks to allow the effectiveness of the signs to be measured, and monitoring was ongoing. The Signs would be replaced in January 2022 and would stay in place until September 2022.

The Council's 'CAReless' campaign had been launched in October 2020 to encourage drivers to switch off their engines, particularly outside schools and in the Air Quality Management Area. Of key importance to the project was community work, and working with businesses had been focussed on over the past year, with help offered in implementing 'no idling' policies, the provision of campaign materials and the erection of suitable signage on private land such as car parks.

Engagement with local schools had proved slightly more challenging over the past year due to Coronavirus restrictions and school closures, but a 'schools toolkit' had nonetheless been launched in March with four schools close to the Air Quality Management area. Using feedback from these schools, the kit was adapted and sent to all schools in the borough. Some schools had been provided with promotional materials and equipment such as air quality monitoring devices, and it was felt that school engagement was now very positive now that the schools had been able to re-open.

Of key importance to the project was providing communities with the resources needed to be able to take their own action on pollution, and this was what was required to make the campaign sustainable in the long term. A campaign advisory group had been set up consisting of local residents and groups, which had advised on promotional materials and events, and a network of over 50 stakeholders had offered assistance with sharing materials and messages to amplify the campaign. Local suppliers had been used for every element of the project, and there had been a focus on embedding the campaign into local communities. The campaign had attracted significant media coverage both nationally and locally.

The campaign had launched in October 2020, and had been evaluated in September and October 2021, and in that time there had been a 6% increase in awareness levels of the impacts of air pollution. Of those residents who had been the subject of an on street survey, there had been a 53% increase of residents reporting that they turned off their engine more than they had done a year ago, and 63% of drivers outside schools reported that they switched off their engines more than they did a year ago. The levels of increased engine switch-offs had been consistent even when the signage had been removed from areas, evidencing the effectiveness of the campaign. It had, however, not been possible to evidence any reduction in actual

pollution levels, as the lockdown response to the pandemic had resulted in no comparable data being available at this time as far fewer journeys had been undertaken. Essex County Council, had made a successful bid to DEFRA for funding for 9 modern pollution monitors which provided live data from the Air Quality Management area which would be invaluable for future monitoring. The CAREless Pollution Campaign had been nominated for a national award, and the results were expected in February 2022. A 'Home Burning' awareness campaign was to run between November 2021 and February 2022 targeting particulate matter pollution from open fires and log burners in the home, to encourage people to burn better, cleaner fuels.

Councillor Cory wondered whether there had been a noted seasonal difference in people switching off their engines, noting that in the winter months people may be more reluctant to go without their car heaters. He also wondered whether there was anything different that could be done, for example supplying bicycles to enable people to swap a car journey for a bicycle journey to remove that element of pollution altogether. The Panel was advised that the initial year of the campaign had been focussed on raising community awareness of the issues, and the coming year would be more concerned with addressing some of the misconceptions that were held, for example if a vehicle engine was switched off in traffic the fan would continue to provide hot air for up to half an hour. It was intended to introduce sustainable transport hubs to Colchester which would include electric bikes, e-cargo bikes and push bikes which could be used by the public on a pay-per-use basis.

Councillor Scordis was pleased to see the improvement in engine switch-offs, and wondered whether bus companies has been contacted, as he felt that busses were potentially poor at switching off their engines. He also wondered whether there was any possibility to move the signage to other areas which may suffer from air pollution. By way of response, the Panel heard that all local bus companies had been contacted, but the past year had been difficult for them and their attention had possibly been focussed on Covid-19 recovery. Work with the companies would continue in the future. It had always been an ambition that the signage would be expanded to other areas, and different messages had been trialled to determine what achieved the biggest impact before signs were deployed to other areas. A suggestion that turning off a vehicle engine would also result in a petrol saving would be included in communications messages in the future.

Councillor Chillingworth felt that it was important to trace the effects of all campaigns, and considered that the Council should be concerned with informing Colchester residents of what it was doing, and Councillors should be acting as leaders and exemplars to ensure that the desired message was reaching residents. Rosie confirmed to the Panel that a communications plan was being drafted, with a focus on peer-to-peer networks including more information about actions that the Council was taking.

Councillor Young called on Councillors to take a pledge to politely challenge motorists with idling engines, supporting Councillor Chillingworth's view of Councillors as exemplars. It was clear that the Council could not achieve its goals

alone, and needed the active support and assistance of schools. She noted that although there had been positive feedback from some schools in relation to the campaign, this needed to be translated into equally positive action to stop vehicle idling outside schools when pupils were dropped off.

Maggie Ibrahim, Sustainability and Climate Change Manager, addressed the Panel and confirmed that it was hoped that the Council would be delivering layered messages as part of the ongoing communications campaign, which was something which would be picked up on again at the Panel's meeting in February 2022.

Councillor King requested some more information about the locations of the new pollution monitoring devices, and asked that Councillors be included in the distribution of any promotional images relating to the project in order that they could further support the message. With regard to tree planting, he wondered whether there was any specific planting which could be undertaken which served to directly reduce airborne pollution. It was confirmed that the new monitoring devices were located in the town centre, and did not replace the current network but were adding to this. The Panel also heard that the primary cause of the pollution in the Air Quality Management Area was vehicle pollution, and it was essential to address this. Councillor Young indicated that she would be able to share some information on plants which could be used to combat air pollution with Officers outside of the meeting.

Councillor Chillingworth requested some clarity on the degree of harm that was caused by wood burning stoves, commenting that he believed that using an appropriate wood burning stove to supplement a heat pump was an environmentally healthy thing to do. It was confirmed that there was no campaign against wood burning stoves, but the intention was to raise awareness and discourage people from burning inappropriate, polluting, items.

Ben Plummer, Climate Emergency Project Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel heard that following a request from Councillor King, additional information in relation to single use plastics had been provided. The Council was running an energy efficient grant scheme which had been publicised already and would be promoted further in January, and the assistance of Councillors in promoting the scheme would be appreciated, as grant funding could be provided to certain households whose homes had a low energy efficiency rating.

Councillor Scordis enquired whether a target date had been set to eliminate single use plastics, and wondered whether it was possible for the Council to become a base for recycling some kinds of plastic which was not collected as part of normal waste collection. Ben confirmed that no date had been set for the elimination of single use plastics, and advice would be sought from Officers about the possibility of making provisions for the recycling of non-standard plastics such as Tetra Packs. The Panel were advised that En-Form were still collecting these plastics.

Councillor Cory highlighted the difficulties with recycling Tetra Pak packaging, and considered that it should be made as easy as possible to recycle this packaging. He

further encouraged the continued use and promotion of the Council's e-cargo bike scheme, offering any support that he could give. Maggie Ibrahim reminded the Panel that it was due to consider the draft Waste Strategy at its meeting in February 2022, which would be an opportunity to receive a more detailed update on recycling issues and provide comments and feedback at this stage. An update would also be provided on sustainable modes of transport at the February meeting, and updates could be shared via email if this was appropriate.

Councillor Young drew the attention of the Panel to the Council's Asset Management Strategy, and the cost of £120m for the Council's housing stock to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2030. She considered that assistance from central government would be needed if this target were to be reached. Councillor King requested some more detailed information in respect of the work that was needed and the cost associated with elements of the project, noting that careful resourcing decisions would need to be made.

Lindsay Barker, Strategic Director of Policy and Place, assured the Panel that a lot of work had been undertaken in respect of the housing space, through work on the Asset Management Strategy, the housing investment programme and the new HRA business plan which would be referred to Cabinet and Council in the new year. The position was very challenging, as the Council was required to carry out compliance work alongside the sustainability work. The Panel heard that the Council's housing stock was in a relatively good position compared to that of some local authorities, but although funding was being sought wherever this was available, the reality was that changes were not able to be made at the pace that the Council would like.

Councillor Chillingworth considered that the biggest obstacle that was faced in the challenge to reduce the use of fossil fuels was outdated housing stock. He considered that there was little point in appealing to central government directly in relation to this issue, but rather approach the Local Government Association (LGA) to act as the voice of local authorities in an appeal for financial assistance. Councillor Young noted that the Council's housing stock was in a better position than some other local authorities and for this reason suggested that Colchester Borough Council may be less likely to receive supporting funding than other authorities. She suggested that the Portfolio Holder for the Environment be requested to lobby the LGA on behalf of the Council. Councillor Cory supported this approach and suggested that reference also be made to the amount of work that the Council had already undertaken to improve its housing stock, reasoning that it would be helpful that government was reminded what could be achieved if support were offered.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted, and that the Portfolio Holder for Environment be requested to lobby the Local Government Association to request funding for housing stock improvements from central government.

50. Work Programme 2020-2021

Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel were asked to approve the addition of an item to the agenda of its meeting in March 2022 in the form of a report providing an overview of the Environment Act 2021.

RESOLVED that the contents of the work programme be noted, and that an item providing an overview of the Environment Act 2021 be added to the agenda of the meeting of the Panel in March 2022.