

Environment and Sustainability Panel

Thursday, 23 September 2021

Attendees: Councillor Peter Chillingworth, Councillor Mark Cory, Councillor John Jowers, Councillor David King, Councillor Lee Scordis, Councillor Julie Young
Also Attending: Councillor Martyn Warnes
Apologies: Councillor Lewis Barber
Substitutes: Councillor Jackie Maclean (for Councillor Lewis Barber)

41 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Councillor Young observed that there had been discussion on Ferry Marsh at both previous meetings, but advised the Panel that this was a complex issue, to which an easy solution did not present itself.

RESOLVED that: the minutes of the meetings held on 24 June 2021 and 22 July 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

42 Have Your Say!

The Panel had received a written representation from Mr Kemal Cufoglu, which was read out by Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer. Mr Cufoglu had written to the Panel on behalf of the Green Action Team (GAT), formerly known as the Glyphosate Working Group (GWG). The attention of the Panel was drawn to a new article published by Colchester Gazette and dated 13 November 2019 when it was noted that a report stated that tenants of Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) properties may have to pay additional maintenance costs as result of the phasing out of glyphosate, unless the housing firm received extra funding to cover the increase. It had come to GAT's attention that the Council had indicated that it would "seek to negotiate on extra costs" to get better value for taxpayers. Since this time, GAT had contacted members of the Cabinet and requested a copy of the report that had described the glyphosate ban as a ground for increasing maintenance costs, information on negotiations which had taken place to avoid increasing the financial burden on tenants, and an indication of the Council's own financial assessment on non-toxic alternatives which had been recommended by the GAT. In addition to this information, a request was made for information on what alternatives to glyphosates were being used in Colchester since 2019.

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director – Environment, addressed the Panel and advised that there had been no increase in service charges or maintenance costs for (CBH) residents, and glyphosate had largely been phased out on CBH land. The alternatives to glyphosate were more expensive, but this was something that would be addressed in the future business case for grounds maintenance which was a significant piece of work. A number of alternatives to glyphosate were being used on Council land including hand weeding, increased strimming and hot foamstream, and testing was continuous in search of the most appropriate solution.

Councillor Cory was pleased that the ban on glyphosate had been approved by the Council, however, he noted that one of the intentions behind this action had been to influence partners, and he sought reassurance that work with CBH was ongoing to phase out the use of glyphosates. Rory Doyle confirmed that negotiations were ongoing with CBH in regard to service level agreements for grounds maintenance, and the phasing out of glyphosate would form part of these.

The Panel had received a written representation from Grace Darke, which was read out by Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer. It was noted that the Council had made a progressive decision to ban glyphosate across Colchester, and now that the spraying season was almost complete, an update report on progress was requested. The Panel were advised that there were a number of alternative weed killers available, including leaving some areas un-weeded as pollinator habitat creation or biodiversity friendly zones. It was acknowledged that it would take time to come up with an effective weed control strategy, as each area posed different challenges and no single solution would be appropriate for all. The Panel were advised that Pesticide Action Network (PAN UK) offered support to councils in finding safe solutions and could offer meetings and other support if this would be helpful. In addition to this, Eco Colchester and Pesticide Free Essex could also support and strengthen the communication that was sent out to the public on the perception of 'weed's and the dangers of glyphosate. Reassurance was sought that the Council would maintain its ban on the use of glyphosates, regardless of the challenges that may have been caused this year when transitioning to nonpesticides.

Rory Doyle confirmed that the alternative methods of weed control were being monitored and would be evaluated at the end of the growing season over the coming months. It was accepted that this was a complex issue, which was why the Council had adopted a phased approach and was continually evaluating the methods that were used, and would be happy to work with partners in the future. In response to a question from Councillor King who wondered whether a target date had been agreed for the phase out, Rory confirmed that the use of glyphosate had already been almost completely phased out and it was only used in specific circumstances. Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager Neighbourhood Services, confirmed to the Panel that the routine use of glyphosate on all Council land had been stopped, and it was now only used to tackle specific species, when great care was taken with its use.

The Panel had received a written representation from Gary Knight, which was read out by Matthew Evans, Democratic Services Officer. Mr Knight posed a number of questions and comments to the Panel: 1) If local governments in England were genuinely concerned about the level of greening in their boroughs, they would be speaking out against the level of development forced on them in recent years by central government. Instead, they succumb to central government's excessive development demands and pretend that initiatives like Colchester Borough Council's Woodland & Biodiversity project are greening their boroughs, when anyone who takes the time to look around, can clearly see the reverse is happening. Has anyone visited the Tollgate area recently? 2) As part of Colchester Borough Council's attempt to display its green credentials, the previous administration engaged in a public relations driven tree planting exercise..... far more concerned about the numbers planted, than whether trees would be planted in the right place, or how many would survive the planting. Has anyone checked to see what proportion of the trees planted as part of

the project, have so far died.... and published those numbers too? Of course not. 3) Any council genuinely concerned about the level of greening in its borough, would be adopting a net-green agenda, with an annual green audit, indicating amongst other things, how much of the borough's natural green areas were being lost to development each year. 4) Despite its attempts to present a green face publicly, Colchester Borough Council is overwhelmingly net positive when it comes to concrete. It's the council's failure to speak out against central government's excessive demands for development in the area, rather than a lack of effective local green initiatives, that's the real problem.

Rosa Tanfield offered a response to the questions raised about the number of trees that had been planted and survived. She confirmed that the Council had adopted an industry standard approach to planting new trees, and planted very small trees called 'whips' which were able to adapt much more flexibly to their environment than larger plants. Sites were monitored and a survival success rate of new plantings had been recorded of between 75% and 94%, and the loss of approximately 25% of new plantings was also an industry standard. Sites were assessed to determine whether additional planting was required, but it was common practice to overplant to start with to compensate for any losses. Plants could be lost due to a variety of reasons including deliberate damage or failure to adapt, but areas were deliberately left unmonitored around new plantings to offer them some protection and water retention.

Councillor King acknowledged that there had been very dry weather in the previous year and trees had been lost as a result of this. The Council had taken care to learn the lessons from these losses and had sought greater community engagement and ownership of planting sites, and the continued adaption of the project had led to better choices of locations for planting to be selected. Councillor Chillingworth confirmed that the 2019/2020 planting season had been a particularly difficult one, and he supported the practice of overplanting to compensate for losses which were inevitable.

Councillor Warnes attended the meeting to address the Panel, advising it that he wished to make a plea for additional cycle parking to be made available. He noted the Council's stated intention to encourage more sustainable methods of transport, with success being measured by an increase in cycling. Cycle routes had been promoted via social media, however, he considered that anyone cycling from Monkwick to the town would encounter a significant obstacle in the form of Scheregate Steps. Councillor Warnes noted that a planning application for secure cycle parking was being considered at the forthcoming meeting of the Planning Committee as application 2120554, and he requested the Panel consider making an additional request for cycle parking to the side of Scheregate Steps to assist those cycling in from Monkwick, potentially on a site that was currently owned by Essex County Council. Councillor Cory noted that Panel Members had to be cautious in making any declarations in respect of a current planning application, but he did support the provision of secure cycle parking in the town. The Panel considered whether or not to add a specific item looking at more general provision of secure cycle parking to its work programme, noting that the Sustainable Modes of Transport Strategy was due to be considered at its upcoming meeting in February 2022. Councillor Scordis suggested that the consideration of secure cycle parking across the town could constitute a significant piece of work, and the Panel determined that it would await the result of the forthcoming planning application before considering its position on the matter.

Year 3 – The Woodland & Biodiversity Project

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager - Neighbourhood Services, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel heard that the Project had launched in 2019 as the Woodland Project, with the aim to plant 200,000 trees across the borough, off setting carbon emissions and making the borough greener. Since this time, the Project had evolved in response to changing circumstances, including the Covid-19 pandemic, and its remit had expanded significantly to include creating a legacy of a greener and more bio-diverse Colchester. There were three clear areas of focus; communities, wildlife and the environment, and although planning trees was important, the Project represented a unique opportunity to collaborate and work with others to create a greener place.

For the environment, the focus of the Project was on how Colchester Borough Council (the Council) could help others, as individuals, organisations or local communities. Wivenhoe Town Council had been supported to trial 'no mow' management schemes across twelve designated open spaces and residential verges in the town. The trial was nearing its conclusion, and it was hoped that as a result of the trial, this way of managing land would be able to be adapted to other town or parish councils. The trial had seen an increase in the numbers of wildflowers on the unmown sites, and an increase in the number of volunteers seeking to assist the scheme. The Panel was advised that funding had recently been awarded to the Council as the result of a joint application with the Essex Forest Partnership, for the supply, planting and maintenance of three hundred and twenty five new standard trees across the borough to create shade and mitigate against flooding.

To support wildlife in the borough, new sites for woodland were being considered, whether on Council or privately owned land, and work was ongoing with partners to connect habitats, such a network for red squirrels on Mersea Island. The Panel were informed that through working with the Essex Forest Partnership, the Council had just been awarded a fully funded, double sized Miyawaki forest. The Miyawaki method of tree planting was first pioneered in the 1970s and was regarded as one of the most effective methods for creating forest cover at speed, encouraging tree growth up to ten times faster than traditional methods and creating a dense canopy with excellent biodiversity.

The Panel heard that the biggest impact that the Project could make was on the communities of the borough. Nine out of ten people surveyed in England stated that they believed that natural spaces were important for health and wellbeing, and this was even more important since the Covid-19 restrictions had been implemented. The Woodland Trust had offered significant support to the community planting element of the Project, assessing each proposed planting site in terms of its location, scale and the most suitable tree species to use and ensuring that new planting did not harm existing habitats. The Council had also received significant support from Together We Grow, who had been instrumental in bringing communities together to plant trees, and over the last two years they had helped to plant 14,000 trees. The work undertaken with Together We Grow had received national recognition and the Council had been a finalist in the Association for Public Excellence (APSE) Annual Service Awards 2021 for the Best Community and Neighbourhood Initiative.

The Panel were shown a video highlighting the work that Together We Grow had accomplished over the past year, together with Refugee Action. A number of case studies were presented from across the community, highlighting the level of engagement that had been achieved with a wide variety of participants, and illustrating the enduring benefits that had been achieved for both individuals and the environment. Rosa explained that although Colchester already had a legacy of greening the borough, it was the aim of the Woodland and Biodiversity Project to actively continue and expand upon this. The Panel heard that members of communities across the borough had engaged with tree planting and maintaining new tree sites with the assistance by Council staff.

Councillor Cory praised the work that had been undertaken supporting both communities and the environment, and he offered to assist as far as he was able to with promoting the work that was being undertaken by sharing the message and promotional video clips that had been produced. He confirmed that the 'no mow' trial that had been run in Wivenhoe had been embraced by the local community with overwhelmingly positive feedback, and he wondered how Councillors could help in further promoting the work that was being undertaken. He asked for more information about the standard trees which had been funded, and the proposed Miyawaki forest, and queried what positive lessons had been learned as a result of the work undertaken to date to assist in the overall completion of the biodiversity project.

Rosa Tanfield confirmed that three areas were being focussed on for planting of the standard trees; riverbanks, roads and footways, and specific areas had already been identified when new plantings could replace trees that had been lost in the past. With regard to the wetland restoration programme, work was ongoing to identify partners and areas of potential external funding to help deliver this project, and the Panel were advised that this work could be delivered either wholesale, on targeted areas or in areas based on the likely outcomes. The Miyawaki funding was for a single site, and three or four locations were currently being considered for this. The project would be carefully assessed to determine its impact and the best method for its successful delivery at other potential sites through the United Kingdom. With regard to lessons that had been learned, the Panel were advised that of key importance to the project going forward was its continued evolution, and embedding the ethos of the Project into the every day work of the Council.

Councillor Chillingworth praised the excellent work that had been undertaken to date and considered that amazing progress had been made over the life of the Project. He did, however, consider that more could be done to explain to communities the actions that were being undertaken to inform and engage with local residents. He suggested that the Council continue to working closely with Parish Councils to not only achieve planting goals, but also to explore areas that may be suitable for planting in the locality. The difficulty with wetland restoration was noted, together with the volume of work that was required in this area, and Councillor Chillingworth wondered whether there was scope to continue this work up to the higher reaches of the Colne. He noted that Cymbeline Meadow was an important area but felt that it may represent an underused resource. The area contained a mix of soils and landscapes, and it was felt that there were opportunities for rewilding work take place there.

By way of response, Rosa confirmed that community engagement was an element of

the Project which had been done well in some areas, but possibly not so well in others and this was an area of the Project which was being actively addressed. In areas where rewilding was taking place, work had been undertaken with local schools to design signage to advise the local community what was taking place. In terms of identifying future sites for planting, a more pro-active approach had been taken with Ward Councillors and Parish Councils being approached to be advised which areas had been identified for planting. Signage would also be displayed at these sites ahead of planting taking place to provide information about the Project and give local communities the chance to get involved or suggest other sites at which they would like to see planting. Suggestions for suitable planting sites were always welcome, whether these were on Council or privately owned land. The Panel heard that Cymbeline Meadow was an area that was being actively considered.

Councillor King praised the work of officers and partners, and considered that although the scope of the Project had been widened, its focus had tightened, and he acknowledged that the positive changes which had been made may take some time to embed. He considered that Cymbeline Meadows were very important, and care should be taken to make the area something that could be shared with the people of Colchester. He stressed the need to make the Meadow accessible as a semi-wild place for the benefit of all, and requested updates on this in the future. He considered that although progress had been made on the Colchester Orbital, this was happening rather slowly, and the Orbital could be a real asset to the town. He noted that a huge amount had been achieved by the Officers to date, and sought assurances that the resources were available to ensure that this progress could continue.

Rosa advised the Panel that Cymbeline Meadow was part of the Project, but that this was a complex site and more detailed information would be made available in the future when this became available. Some progress had been made in respect of the Orbital, and wayfinding discs would shortly be installed on Council sites and Walk Colchester had created an Orbital leaflet which was in production. It was acknowledged that there was still a lot of work to be done in this area. In terms of resources, the Panel was assured that sufficient resources were available to carry the Project forward over the coming years, and external funding was being actively sought.

Councillor Jowers did support the potential re-wilding of Cymbeline Meadow, but considered that there should be a focus on street trees. He advised the Panel that it was now possible to buy disease free Elm trees, and suggested that a wide variety of planting would be most advantageous. He noted the previous efforts that had been made over a number of years in relation to planting wildflower seeds when planting works had been carried out on verges and urged that these not be forgotten. It was suggested that the Council should seek far greater engagement with the Ministry of Defence, who in Councillor Jowers' opinion possessed some of the finest woodland in East Anglia.

Councillor Scordis noted the success of the community Tree Guardians role, but suggested that this needed support for the future to ensure that the volunteers were able to be replaced as time went on to safeguard the future of the project. The Panel were advised that it was now possible to book a tree planting session via the website, and were encouraged to do so.

Councillor Cory supported the points made by Councillor King, but advised the Panel that he had seen a number of social media posts relating to the Colchester Orbital which suggested that people were running and walking round it. He acknowledged that there was still more to be done to make the Orbital as accessible as possible.

Rory Doyle referred to the Terms of Reference of the Panel, and in particular to be a leading voice for environmental sustainability, promoting innovative environmental practices, having influence across the borough and beyond, including public and private sector policy, at regional and national levels. He felt that the work associated with the Woodland and Biodiversity Project was a perfect example of the Terms of Reference in action, citing the recent awards finals as evidence of this. The hard work and enthusiasm of all staff involved in the Project were what had led to this success.

RESOLVED that: the contents of the report be noted.

44 Climate Emergency Action Plan Update

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 its previous meeting, more information had been requested on the Clean Air for Colchester project, including pollution figures. At the present time, detailed figures were not available, however, the project was due to complete in October 2021 at which time a report would be prepared to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). There had been some issues with the portable air quality monitors which had been used, however, air quality centres were to be installed in Brooke Street and the town centre which would allow more detailed monitoring. With regard to secure cycle parking, the Panel were advised that the decision had been taken to focus on town centre areas for the provision of this parking, and once it had been seen how this operated, residential areas would then be considered. The suggestion that had been made to the Panel by Councillor Goacher that hessian bags be provided to market stalls in the town instead of plastic bags had been investigated by officers who had obtained quotes, and funding for this was now being discussed with Councillors.

The Panel were advised that Essex County Council had made a Climate Action Challenge Fund available to communities to apply to carry out projects that tackle climate related challenges, for sums of up to £5,000 for smaller groups or projects and £20,000 for larger projects, charities and schools. Information about this had been emailed to Councillors and Parish Councils, and some responses had been received. A second stream of funding would be available in the near future via the Government's Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery (LAD) Scheme phase 2, to contribute towards improving the energy efficiency of homes in Colchester, where residents were on low incomes and with homes with low energy efficiency. Councillors were requested to help raise awareness of this. Echoing comments previously made by Councillor Young, Ben confirmed to the Panel that the Eco Festival Colchester had been a very successful event that had been supported by volunteers, with families engaging and showing interest in current and future projects which.

Councillor Chillingworth noted that information on air pollution levels had been provided as part of the officer's report, but he did not consider that any particular fall in pollution rates had been indicated, and he wondered whether the Council had taken

the issue seriously enough. Councillor Young supported these comments and wondered whether there was an option for targeted planting to specifically absorb carbon dioxide in roads which were particularly badly affected.

The Panel heard that the reduction in traffic flow due to the national lockdowns had improved air quality in 2020 but this artificial environment made it hard to judge what the ongoing impact would be. The Council would continue to build on its 'no idling' work and promote more sustainable methods of transport such as via shared travel hubs which were the subject of a current survey. A more detailed update would be provided to the next meeting of the Panel.

Councillor Cory recognised that the Council had a responsibility to monitor the air quality, but wondered whether there was an opportunity to bring in partners such as Essex County Council and others. He supported the comments of others in relation to the Eco Festival, which had been a very successful event showcasing, among other things, the e-cargo bikes that the Council had secured; and the Panel were urged to take advantage of these.

Councillor King noted that the Council was reviewing its staff travel plan, and wondered whether or not cycling was being actively promoted as part of this, suggesting that the Council had an opportunity to learn by example. The Panel were reminded that a couple of years ago the Council had made a concerted effort to reduce the amount of single use plastics on its sites, and Councillor King requested an update on progress that had been made in this regard.

Ben Plummer confirmed that the Council did actively promote cycling for work, including providing a session that allowed members of staff to access free cycle maintenance and repairs as well as distributing free items such as bells and puncture repair kits. Work was also ongoing with local businesses to help them promote cycling for staff and the use of the e-cargo bikes.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

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Environment and Sustainability 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 considered when it would be most appropriate to discuss updates on air pollution, secure cycle parking and single use plastics, and considered that it should be left to officers to determine the most appropriate time for updates, either as individual items or as part of other reports.

RESOLVED that the contents of the work programme be noted.