

SCRUTINY PANEL

15 March 2022

Present: -

Councillor Cory (Chair)
Councillor Barton, Councillor Chapman, Councillor
Loveland, Councillor Whitehead, Councillor
Willetts, Councillor Wood

Substitutions: -

Councillor Lilley for Councillor Bourne

Also present: -

Councillor Crow, Councillor Dundas, Councillor
Ellis, Councillor Laws

343. Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 15 February 2022 be approved as a correct record.

344. Decisions taken under special urgency provisions

Richard Block, Assistant Director – Corporate and Improvement, introduced the one decision which had been taken under special urgency provisions, the awarding of the contract for refurbishment and decarbonising of Rowan House. Over £500k of Government funding had been provided for this work. Changes in the building sector had necessitated a series of changes to the plans to ensure these remained within budget; this had delayed the procurement process. To ensure that the Government funding was not lost, the decision had to be taken and contract awarded before the Government's deadline elapsed on 14 March 2022. This was the reason for the use of the urgent decision provisions and the lack of call-in period. Approval for this had been sought and granted by the Chairman of Scrutiny Panel, and the decision report and documents had been circulated to the Scrutiny Panel prior to this meeting.

A Panel member underlined the importance of strong decision making and the fundamental importance of the right of councillors to call in decisions about which they held serious concerns for scrutiny by the Panel. Whilst it was accepted that there were occasional needs to use urgency provisions, the member underlined the importance of gaining an explanation as to why the decisions had to be taken under the Council's protocol for urgent decisions. The Assistant Director shared concerns regarding the use of urgent decision provisions and noted that this was a rarity, with this being the first urgent decision necessary in the 2021-22 municipal year. If the decision had not been taken in this fashion, it would have cost £500k extra to the Council, to make up for the lost Government funding.

The Assistant Director explained that officers had worked hard to complete the necessary work on what would be a complex project to decarbonise using new

technology. There was an expectation from Government that the Council would showcase how to decarbonise similar buildings. It had been an involved process to put in place the necessary elements for the project specifics. A Panel member expressed agreement with the need to proceed with an urgent decision and asked for details regarding the project methodology and the timescales set. The Assistant Director was asked as to when the Government funding deadline had been noted by the Council and whether there had been a sensible balancing of time and work. The Assistant Director explained that the project had initially been conceived in March 2021, with Cabinet then deciding to pursue decarbonisation and changes to the use of Rowan House. The Government funding deadline had been laid down around a month/month-and-a-half prior to the date of that new deadline, which was a key change to the requirements for spending the funding granted.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Panel had noted the decision taken under special urgency provisions.

345. Portfolio Holder Briefing from Cllr Simon Crow [Environment and Sustainability]

Councillor Simon Crow, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, presented the highlights from his portfolio and paid tribute to the officers who had helped and advised him since his appointment to that position.

The Council continued to work with the Carbon Trust to look at how it could achieve net zero carbon and to make environmental sustainability an integral part of the Council's tendering process. The Council also worked with the Essex Forest Partnership to plant 325 new trees, put in place a 'no mow' scheme, increase levels of wild flowers and plants and to hold community planting days. The Council aimed to have planted 20,000 new trees by the end of the 2021-22 municipal year and was concentrating on maximising the number which survived and grew, rather than the number planted. Examples of planting locations were given. Trees planted were maintained and funding had already been gained for that work.

The Portfolio Holder highlighted the Red Squirrel Project, the re-establishing of the tree collection service for residents and the pledge by Colchester Borough Homes [CBH] to follow the Council's example in ceasing use of glyphosate weedkiller, except where it would be directly injected to kill invasive species of flora.

Work had begun to procure electric vehicles [EVs] by Helpline, following the example of the North Essex Parking Partnership who already had five in operation. EV charging points were being installed and more were planned, with the Council seeking to access funding for this.

The Council was working to develop a long-term parking strategy alongside the new Town Centre Master Plan. The St. Mary's car park had been improved, with wider ground floor bays, a new paint scheme and better walkways. In answer to questions regarding the number of bays, the Portfolio Holder explained that the car park had a surfeit of spaces and could widen some and still preserve enough bays. The existing bays had been designed for older, smaller cars from decades ago, and demand for car parking had diminished over time. Modern models, even the smaller cars, were

wider and needed wider bays. The Portfolio Holder was asked if there were plans to offer other facilities or shops at the car park and confirmed that there were no plans, but that this could be discussed with officers.

Secure cycle parks were being installed, such as the one on St. Isaac's Walk. 25 E Cargo Bikes had also been purchased, funded by a grant from the Energy Saving Trust. An E Cargo Bike courier service had been established for use by Town Centre shops, funded by a grant from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Air quality targets were being set, with actions including better signage on Brook Street and at Eastgates to encourage people to stop idling engines.

Improvements were being made to the Shrub End Depot, including better staff facilities and an improved weighbridge being ordered. A memory garden had been installed for staff and site drainage had been improved.

A campaign had been run to emphasise the crackdown on enforcing the three-bag limit for residential black-bag waste. The Council had been nominated for recycling awards in the past year and was set to create a new Recycling Strategy to meet the requirements of the expected passage of the Environment Bill through Parliament.

The Portfolio Holder confirmed that he continued to work with Essex County Council [ECC] on producing a Transport Strategy, expected to be released in the near future. In answer to questions regarding negative public feedback on the ECC electric scooter trials, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that he had seen much abuse of the scheme, but that this seemed to be waning and its scooters being used more appropriately. Infractions have been reported where these are seen. Members often used these scooters, and the Portfolio Holder defended their use as a travel option in place of car use.

A Panel member noted that the results of the Climate Emergency UK review had recently been published, with the Council doing well and scoring above average. It was noted that the Council had gaps in its diversity and problems with exclusion and the Portfolio Holder was asked for information as to the Council's plans for improvement. The Portfolio Holder stated that the Council had been rated the second-highest performing authority in Essex and gave assurance that it was addressing ways to improve, including some easy wins identified.

A Panel member asked for an update on the blue bag scheme for clothing recycling. The Portfolio Holder gave a promise to provide a written answer following the meeting, acknowledging that there had been complaints and explaining that the administration had been looking to find ways to improve the scheme since it took power. A Panel member noted that a number of residents had stopped using the scheme due to its unreliability.

The Panel discussed the replacement of the old Shrub End Depot weighbridge. The old bridge had been removed and officers were using alternative methods until the replacement could be installed. The Portfolio Holder offered to discuss this with

officers and provide a more-complete description of how officers were operating without the use of this weighbridge in the short term.

In answer to questions regarding rural street cleansing, the Portfolio Holder gave assurance that Councillor Beverley Oxford, Portfolio Holder for Communities, was working to address this. There had been issues with the Council's vehicle fleet's computer systems. This had been resolved, but had caused delays in service provision.

A Panel member detailed work done to steward Ferry Marsh [Wivenhoe] and requested that the Council look to acquire land currently in the Crown Dependency in order to better steward it.

The Panel discussed potential ways to improve the use of portfolio holder briefings at Panel meetings. It was generally felt that they had been informative and interesting, but had taken up too much of the work programme and led to items being shoehorned into packed agendas. It was felt that they had led to unfocussed discussions, and it was suggested that they should be more focussed on key decisions in the future. It was also suggested that they focus more on specific topics and go into more depth on narrower topics.

Councillor Andrew Ellis, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning, joined the meeting and recommended that, if future briefings were to be more-focussed deep dives into specific topics, then officers should accompany portfolio holders to help give greater details and operational information where necessary. It was also suggested that it would help for the Panel to have better communications with Cabinet in case Panel items arose which would benefit from Cabinet members attending to give information or answer questions.

The Scrutiny Panel and officers thanked Councillor Tina Bourne for her work during her time as an elected member, ahead of her retirement at the forthcoming elections.