

**Extract from the minutes of the Policy Panel meeting of 2 March 2022**

**42. River Strategy**

Rory Doyle, Assistant Director (Environment), introduced the report, which was centred around the River Colne, and extolled the potential benefits of the Council producing a Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy. The Panel had previously discussed the merit of a strategy for the River Colne and much was now happening, including the future of the Colne and the embedding of waterway management within the Council's planning. A new Green and Blue Strategy would lend itself to further work, potentially by the Policy Panel. The Environment and Sustainability Panel had received updates on the woodland and biodiversity project and a wetland restoration project had been identified as an option to pursue, alongside partners.

The Panel were informed that changes to the leasehold of the River Colne had provided the opportunity for the development of options for fishing rights. A Panel member suggested that the recommendation proposed for this [2.4] be amended to say that this be presented to the Portfolio Holder 'for consideration', rather than 'for agreement.' It was noted by a Panel member that the granting of fishing rights could aid in conservation of the River, creating a group of people who fished and would have an incentive to work to preserve the Colne's ecosystems and press for their preservation.

The report content was praised, and members welcomed the prioritisation of the River Colne within the Council's planning. A member noted that river stewardship was a national issue and expressed support for development of the Colne as an asset, gaining and heeding expert views as to how to proceed to avoid causing issues and harm to biodiversity. Expert views on ecological impacts would be vital.

The Assistant Director was asked if there were any implications regarding sea walls and whether this should be discussed with partner organisations and stakeholders, such as local farmers. Options such as 'managed retreat' were discussed.

A Panel member noted that the report showed environmentally sensitive areas [ESAs] and asked whether these should be removed from the Strategy, as they were no longer in operation. The Assistant Director was also asked whether Ramsar sites were set by the EU, and whether they were on a statutory footing in the UK.

Views were given that the upper Colne [before the River reached Colchester] didn't receive as much attention as the Stour Valley. The old Colne River Project had had an officer dedicated to helping residents to improve wildlife and biodiversity. A Panel member suggested that such a position would be helpful if reintroduced. A member gave the view that the upper and lower Colne should have their own separate approaches and stewardship plans. The lower Colne was clear of large-scale moorings, due to the past prioritisation of commercial traffic to and from Colchester. The Panel suggested that the Strategy would be beneficial, but would need to be continuously reviewed and updated, which could include a role for the Policy Panel to assist with this.

A Panel member requested more detail regarding changes to the leasehold of the River Colne and details of all lease owners, if there were any not listed in the report. The Assistant Director was also encouraged to make use of the expertise available at the University of Essex and its World-leading experts on the subjects to be covered by the Strategy.

A Panel member noted that three rivers in different parts of the World had been granted legal personhood, thus putting the pollution of those rivers on the same standing as intentionally harming a person. Environmental politics were moving towards more entity rights and stronger legal protections.

The Panel considered whether the strategy might be better named as the 'River and Bodies of Water Strategy.'

The Panel discussed the history of the Colne River, including the holding of harbour inspection tours, which had ceased once the Colne River ceased to be dredged and the harbour decommissioned.

The Panel recommended that the Assistant Director, Environment, take on all the suggestions and views given by the Policy Panel and apply these when the River Strategy/Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy is drafted.

*RECOMMENDED* to CABINET that: -

- a) Work be commenced to develop a new Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy for Colchester and that development of the strategy be incorporated within a

Panel work programme for the 2022/23 municipal year. A key element of the strategy development to include consultation with stakeholders.

- b) Options be explored working alongside key partners to identify and lever in external funding to accelerate wetland restoration projects as part of the Woodland and Biodiversity Programme of work.
- c) The Council collaborates with the Land Use and Green Infrastructure Essex Climate Action Commission with a view to the Council being a partner to the proposed Essex Climate Focus Area and that future updates are taken to Environment & Sustainability Panel for consideration.
- d) An options paper on fishing rights for the River Colne be developed with stakeholders and presented to the relevant portfolio holder for consideration.