

CABINET

12 October 2022

Present: - Councillor King (Chair)
Councillors Cory, Fox, Goss, Luxford Vaughan, Nissen,
J. Young

Also in attendance: Councillors Harris, Scott-Boutell,
Willets

693. Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings held on 7 September 2022 be confirmed as a correct record.

694. Have Your Say!

Piter Vera addressed the Cabinet pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(1) to seek the Council's support for a project designed to reduce the amount of plastic that was exported for disposal. The project involved the use of plastics with glass to create a new product which would be fireproof, water resistant and hard to destroy. It was anticipated that it could be used in building projects. It would also be cheap. He was seeking to obtain funding and a four acre site to take the project forward. The local MP had expressed some support for the project and he hoped the Council would indicate its support by signing up for the scheme at the meeting.

Members of the Cabinet expressed support for the principle of the project. It would not be appropriate to sign up to the scheme without undertaking due diligence, particularly in respect of the financial strategy. The Council had a good record on recycling and looked to support local businesses. However, it was the waste collection authority, and was not responsible for waste disposal. It would not have a vacant four acre site, although there may be scope for exploring possible sites allocated for employment in section 1 of the Local Plan. Cabinet thanked Mr Vera for bringing the project forward and it would ask officers to look at the scheme and put him in touch with other organisations such as Colbea who might be able to advise him further.

Councillor Harris attended and with the consent of the Chair addressed Cabinet to express his concern about the recent change in policy that prevented the collection of armchairs and sofas as items of bulky waste. This stemmed from advice from the Environment Agency. The consequence was an increase in such items being left in gardens, where they deteriorated before they could be recycled, or being fly tipped. Concern was expressed about the impact this would have on local neighbourhoods. He had raised similar concerns at Essex County Council.

Councillor Goss, Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Waste, explained that the Council had had to withdraw this service on 1 September 2022, following a government directive. Essex County Council had advised that residents should be encouraged to donate such items to charity shops, but this was not always possible, as they had limited capacity and such items were often in poor condition. It was felt that a more robust approach was necessary and he would raise the matter further with both Essex County Council and the Environment Agency.

695. Update on Progress in Delivering Cabinet Vision and Priorities

The Interim Chief Operating Officer submitted a report a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Cabinet received a presentation from Michelle Tarbun, Group Manager, Wellbeing, Prevention and Communities, on the support being provided to communities and residents in response to the cost of living crisis. This set out the activity that had been taken so far and set out the new approach:-

- Immediate help for those suffering financial hardship/crisis intervention.
- Longer term support for those worried about increasing costs.
- Support in the community (Including warm welcoming spaces).

The scale of the help provided so far to residents was highlighted. Since April 2022 support had been provided to 317 residents to help with housing costs, and 66 residents had received help with Council tax costs. From September more detailed data was being collected and this showed that 129 residents had been referred to the Financial and Employment Support Service. Colchester Borough Homes financial inclusion caseloads were not yet showing significant trends but there was a clear trend of increasing Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) claims which indicated an increase in residents experiencing financial hardship.

A wide range of actions were underway to address these issues. These included plans for increased support through the LCTS scheme for 2023/24, improvements to the Council website to make it more personal and easier to navigate and continued outreach through tools such as leaflets and Facebook videos. In addition, the Council would become a referral partner for the Money and Pensions Service, which would make it easier to provide support for residents in debt, liaison with the University of Essex to use their expertise in data collection and analysis and an internal restructure combining the Financial and Employment Support with the Communities Team which would help provide a more coordinated approach.

Councillor Cory, Portfolio Holder for Resources, thanked the Group Manager for the work undertaken by her team and highlighted the support that had been provided to communities by the Council through the Covid pandemic and the cost of living crisis. The crisis was likely to worsen in view of recent fiscal announcements. 99.4% of council tax rebates had now been paid, and all those in the greatest need had received their rebate. A consultation was underway on a more generous LCTS for 2023/24. The restructure of the relevant teams and the partnership with the Money and Pensions Service enabled the

teams to give much more detailed advice to residents at an early stage. The mapping of warmer places was welcomed. Good communication on the support available was essential and the importance of improvements to the website and the concept of pop up outreach events was stressed.

In discussion, Cabinet members stressed their support for the work undertaken to support residents and communities through the cost of living crisis. It was suggested that although Colchester Borough Homes financial inclusion caseloads may not be increasing significantly, this was because Housing Officers were trained to recognise these issues and were intervening at an early stage. Whilst the mapping of warm welcoming spaces was welcome it needed to be borne in mind that these venues would be facing increased energy costs themselves. It was suggested that there would be value in a dissemination event for this sector organisations for them to provide information about the help and support that they provided. Clarification was also sought about Discretionary Housing Payments, which seemed to be decreasing since April and further information would be provided.

In a response to a question in respect of access to improved data, the Group Manager explained that new Experion software would provide data down to post code level which would allow support to be better targeted.

In terms of the priority on City Status and strengthening Colchester's heritage and cultural offer, Councillor Cox, Portfolio Holder for Heritage and Culture, explained that preparations for City Status were proceeding apace and a three pronged approach was being taken, . The three strands were civic events around the award of City Status, a heritage strategy of events for the year following the award of City Status and a longer term Place Making theme. Several heritage events were being planned and linked to existing events in the calendar.

Councillor Nissen, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, provided an update on the priority on improving the quality of life for residents. This included:-

- Working with stakeholders to plan tree planting across the borough. There would be better engagement with communities and ward councillors on the issue.
- Obtaining funding for the planting of over 120 street trees.
- There would a focus on the naturalisation of sites, which would include Cymbeline Meadows becoming a nature reserve under the Woodland and Biodiversity Project.
- Work was underway with the University to open up waterways.
- A community clear air project on North Hill.
- Attendance at a national air quality conference.

In respect of the priority relating to tackling climate change and reducing litter and graffiti, Councillor Nissen, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability, and Councillor Goss, Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Waste, provided an update on the work undertaken which included:-

- Looking at ways to protect the borough's coastline.
- Increased education programmes for residents to help them make better ecological choices.

- The Climate Emergency Action Plan was being reviewed to update existing actions and add additional actions, including a new bike shelter at the Shrub End depot.
- Representatives from partners would be attending the COP 27 conference in Egypt.
- There had been a 4.3% decrease in emissions from pre-Covid levels.
- The Rowan House decarbonization project had progressed well and Rowan House should reopen in December
- A dedicated graffiti team had been established which meant response times to reports of graffiti had reduced.
- The possibility of recharging the costs of cleaning graffiti from public utilities to the relevant company or authority was being explored.
- Funding had been obtained from Keep Britain Tidy for an additional vehicle to support the cleaning of gum from footways.
- Monthly Days of Action had been reinstated.

Councillor J. Young Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities, provided an update on the work undertaken on the priority relating to Affordable Housing and Physical and Digital Infrastructure as follows:-

- The need to be creative on the delivery of affordable housing was stressed. The 100 Homes project had been very successful and had proved a quicker way of delivering affordable housing than through section 106 contributions.
- The Council was working with Winslee Charity on a project that would deliver an increased number of almshouses.
- Garage sites had provided good quality sustainable housing, which would also act as a lever to make other larger housing units available. The housing on garage sites could be used as a show case for the quality of build expected by private developers.

Councillor King, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy highlighted that engagement had now commenced on the new Strategic Plan. It was important to engage with Councillors across the Council and the consultation included a specific survey for Councillors. The key issue to address was how far the strategic priorities might need to change and how that change could be managed in a sustainable way. Councillor Fox, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Local Economy and Transformation, stressed the opportunity that City Status provided to consider the future of Colchester and how it might look in ten years' time, and what residents might want and need. He welcomed the input of the Policy Panel on this issue.

RESOLVED that the progress against the Key Priorities to deliver the Cabinet's vision be noted.

REASONS

To ensure satisfactory delivery of Cabinet's vision and key priorities this municipal year.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

No alternative options were presented to Cabinet.

696. Cost of Living Crisis – Council Response

Minute 56 of the Policy Panel meeting of 21 September was submitted to Cabinet, a copy of which had been circulated to each member.

Councillor Scott-Boutell, Chair of Policy Panel, attended and with the consent of the Chair, addressed the Cabinet. She considered that the Panel was working in a positive way and was a useful link between non-executive members and the Cabinet. The Panel had brought forward a number of useful suggestions and she endorsed the recommendations made in minute 56.

Councillor Willetts attended and with the consent of the Chair addressed the Cabinet to express concern about the recommendation in respect of the Council's website. If the recommendation was approved there was a danger that this could lead to the home page of the website becoming cluttered with a number of links to other organisations. This had been an issue previously and made the website confusing and difficult to navigate. Any changes to the website should only be implemented after being successfully trialled by a group of Councillors and a focus group of residents.

Councillor King, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, thanked the Policy Panel for the recommendations. The Cabinet was committed to consulting with members at an early stage on proposals to give an opportunity for meaningful input. In terms of the website, it was not easy to get the balance between clarity and depth right. However, the parts of the website dealing with cost of living were very clear and used links appropriately to allow users to access more detailed information.

RESOLVED that

- (a) The Council makes its website more user-friendly, with better branding to maximise its effectiveness at providing information and links to organisations which could provide advice and assistance.
- (b) Future resourcing reflects the need to support people across all communities within the Borough.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

It was open to Cabinet not to agree the recommendations from the Policy Panel.

697. Policy Panel Work Programme

Minute 77 of the Policy Panel meeting of 21 September 2022 was submitted to Cabinet, a copy of which had been submitted to each member.

Councillor Scott-Boutell, Chair of Policy Panel, attended and with the consent of the Chair, addressed the Cabinet. She emphasised the Panel's role in engaging with residents and

highlighted that the naming of items on its work programme was sometimes confusing to members of the public. An example of this was Blue/Green Infrastructure. More clarity was needed so they were more readily understandable.

Councillor Goss, Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Waste, endorsed Councillor Scott=Boutell's comments.

Councillor King, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, explained that the Rapid Transit System was an emerging project. Some further detail had been shared with members of the Joint Committee for Tending Colchester Borders Garden Community recently. It would be appropriate to share this with members more widely, but this would be best be done through an alternative method such as an all member briefing.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) The Policy Panel be given permission to consider Council support for small local businesses.
- (b) Information on proposals for a Colchester Rapid Transport System, including design, plans and connectivity be provided through an alternative method such as an all member briefing.

REASONS

Cabinet considered it was more appropriate for information on the Colchester Rapid Transport System to be provided through an alternative method such as all member briefing.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

It was open to Cabinet to approve both of the recommendations from the Policy Panel.

698. Colchester's Housing Strategy 2022-27

Minute 359 of the Scrutiny Panel meeting of 5 July 2022 was submitted to Cabinet, a copy of which had been submitted to each member.

Councillor Willetts, Chair of the Scrutiny Panel, attended and with the consent of the Chair addressed the Cabinet. The Scrutiny Panel had fully supported the Housing Strategy, and in particular the target of 30% of properties to be built on a major development be affordable housing. There was some concern that some developers sought to undermine this through arguments on viability, and the Panel wanted to emphasise the importance of maintaining the 30% target. The Panel had also raised a concern that the collection of section 106 contributions was not as effective as it could be and had requested a report so that it could be satisfied that the system was fit for purpose. It would also be receiving a report on the appropriateness of family/local affiliations in setting of local leasing and sales policies.

Councillor Luxford-Vaughan, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Infrastructure, stressed the need for the Council to develop the necessary expertise to better understand and counter

developers' arguments on viability.

Councillor J. Young, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Communities, emphasised that the 30% target was in the Housing Strategy. This was a live document which would be actively pursued. The Panel would be receiving reports on issues relating to section 106 collection and local lettings and sale policies.

Councillor King, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, stressed that the 30% affordable housing was being broadly achieved across all sites. He was grateful to the Panel for the recommendation which the Cabinet was content to accept. The value of the work of the Scrutiny Panel and the Council's approach to scrutiny had been recognised by the recent Peer Review.

RESOLVED that the Council retain a target that 30% of the properties to be built for any major development must be required to be affordable housing.

REASONS

The recommendation by the Scrutiny Panel was already Council policy.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

No alternative options were proposed.

699. Progress of Responses to the Public

The Assistant Director, Corporate and Improvement Services, submitted a progress sheet a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

RESOLVED that the contents of the Progress Sheet be noted.

REASONS

The progress sheet was a mechanism by which the Cabinet could ensure that public statements and questions were responded to appropriately and promptly.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

No alternative options were presented to the Cabinet.