

Environment and Sustainability Panel

11 March 2021

Present: Councillor Nigel Chapman
Councillor Peter Chillingworth
Councillor Mark Cory
Councillor Robert Davidson
Councillor Mark Goacher
Councillor Sam McCarthy
Councillor Lee Scordis
Councillor Lorcan Whitehead

Substitutes:

24. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Chapman declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue of his representing Colchester Borough Council on the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership and Joint Advisory Committee, which he Chaired.

25. Have Your Say!

The Panel had received two representations from members of the public, which the Democratic Services Officer had been requested to read at the meeting.

Grace Dark, representing En-form and Eco-Colchester praised the work that had been done in installing solar panels on Colchester Borough Homes properties, and requested confirmation that all suitable Council owned properties had the maximum number of solar panels installed. She asked that Essex County Council's scheme to support private owners to install solar panels known as 'Solar Together' was promoted to Colchester residents and local housing associations via the Council's digital channels.

Andrew Wilkinson, representing En-Form Colchester made comments in relation to item 7 on the agenda relating to the Colchester Woodland and Biodiversity Project. He praised the Council's decision to declare a climate emergency and update its sustainability strategy, together with the Colchester Woodland Project. He requested that the Council give consideration to strengthening its processes by adopting the following:

1. Recognising and adopting the biodiversity hierarchy - Reduce impact, Retain (Save) it is far more important, easier and cheaper to retain existing and established wildlife areas than create new habitat, Rewild, Restore /

Repair, Reintroduce /Replant throughout the council in the Woodland project and planning procedures.

2. Ensuring that wild areas, green spaces, reserves and grade A farmland are detailed in the local plan. Too much emphasis is placed on housing currently. We need to rule development areas out as well as in a much clearer manner. Rule out Local Wildlife Sites identified in the CBC Local Wildlife Site Review for development.
3. To recognise the importance of all species and habitats not just woodland. Grassland and heaths for example are just as important. To formally state this as part of the Woodland Project.
4. To recognise the importance of the area surrounding wildlife habitats and not just the habitat itself. For instance, do not develop up to the boundary of wildlife areas.
5. To recognise the importance of biodiverse green spaces to the health and wellbeing of residents. This has become particularly relevant during Covid.
6. Ensure that residents throughout the Town have local access to wild areas.
7. All wild areas are important, but the large wild areas are of particular importance as wildlife needs space to thrive and residents need space to explore. Urban areas need green lungs.
8. That the council will seek to engage the local residents in decisions and in particular local environment groups.

He further requested that the Council suspend all new major developments apart from those which had planning permission, and a suspension of the Local Plan while future needs were assessed.

Councillor Cory confirmed that the Council was seeking to work with local residents and environmental groups, and in response to the comments made by Grace Dark noted that a couple of years ago the Council had been at the forefront of installing solar panels on its properties, reducing energy bills for residents as a result. It was confirmed that other technologies were being considered to improve the energy efficiency of Council buildings including the Northern Gateway ground source heat pump and air heat pumps, and significant investment had been approved for use in 'greening' projects.

Councillor King, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources, acknowledged the comments made by Mr Wilkinson, which he was grateful to receive, and which would be addressed in detail later in the meeting. Councillor Cory confirmed that the ongoing work of the Panel and Local Plan Committee would also seek to address the points that had been made.

26. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

27. Year 2 – The Woodland & Biodiversity Project

Councillor King, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources attended the meeting and informed the Panel that it was a privilege to be able to introduce a project which effected lasting change. He commented on the level of change that had been achieved through the project in a relatively short space of time, praising the work of Officers and partner stakeholders, who had evolved the project from tree planting into wider bio-diversity care and development. The Panel were advised that the proposed planting would be carried out subtly, keeping in mind the environment, health and the impact on nature, and the emotional impact that the project had generated was a remarkable feature. The real difference that the project would achieve would not be planting thousands of trees, but rather ensuring that people felt a connection to the changing environment.

Rosa Tanfield, Group Manager – Neighbourhood Services, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel heard that in considering the work of the project for the second year, five themes had been paramount; planting and greening, urban planting, stakeholder development and planning. In terms of planting and greening, fourteen thousand trees had been planted and the project was now including hedgerows and shrubs, with fourteen sites identified for self-generation, where trees would be enabled to grow for themselves. The use of glyphosate weed killers had been phased out, and in addition to this reducing the frequency of grass cutting of verges was being considered, together with changes to the management of the verges to try to encourage wildflower growth. A template had been prepared detailing how the Council could work with local areas to enable re-wilding and reduce grass cutting. Urban planting was also being encouraged to allow access to green spaces, and the project team had been working with Colchester Orbital and were also working to encourage more planting in the town centre through both current and emerging projects. Public engagement was a key part of the work being undertaken, and the involvement of local communities was encouraged to love and care for their local environment. Despite the difficulties posed by Covid-19, information packs had been prepared and sent to schools with information and guidance, and it was intended to work more closely with the schools in the future. Engagement had been successful through the Council's social media channels through this time and the website was constantly updated. Stakeholder development was key to ensuring that the project delivered a lasting legacy, and public engagement would be a key focus for the project in the future. Particular thanks was offered to the groups Together we Grow, Essex Forest Initiative, the Woodland Trust and the informal stakeholder group.

There were ambitious plans for planting in the coming year, and Officers had been looking at larger sites for this, as well as reviewing how the project could be integrated into existing work and strategies going forward. Additional planting had been considered at the Northern Gateway site, together with opportunities to support the bee line campaign which was aimed at developing a series of insect pathways.

The Panel were shown a short film outlining the impact that the project had on the local community and volunteers.

Councillor Goacher asked for specific detail on how the project would be developed beyond the planting of trees in terms of biodiversity, highlighting the loss of meadowland across the country, and wondering whether any sites had been identified where meadowland could be restored. He further noted the decline in the number of ponds and enquired whether this had been addressed as part of the project, as ponds were a major source of biodiversity. In relation to the wildlife corridors that had been referred to, he enquired whether the public had been approached to improve the biodiversity of private gardens by including them in this work. Councillor Goacher sought assurances that work was being undertaken with the Council's commercial companies to try to encourage their projects to be greener in their nature.

Councillor King confirmed his support for the points and suggestions that Councillor Goacher had made, and noted the need to understand the biodiversity of areas to allow for mixed use of both nature and human access.

Rosa Tanfield confirmed that the project had evolved significantly since its inception, and assured the Panel that the points raised by Councillor Goacher would be part of future considerations as the project was developed further in year three. Of key importance was the continued involvement of stakeholders to engage and encourage private landowners to support the programme and potentially contribute to projects such as bee corridors. With regard to town centre development, Rosa confirmed that her team was actively involved with development work that was taking place and ensured that green issues were considered as part of this.

Councillor Chillingworth offered praise for the project, and in particular the levels of community engagement that had taken place and were planned for the future. He encouraged Officers to engage with Parish Councils as well as the town centre. He noted the difficulty with planting trees that had been caused by the drought in 2020, and he wondered whether the Council had been able to replace trees that had been lost.

Councillor King commented on the importance of an emotional connection to the environment and the importance of stakeholder development. He confirmed that the project had suffered tree losses but these were looking to be replaced. He discussed the possibility of watering new trees, but noted the difficulty in watering the thousands of trees associated with mass planting. He assured the Panel that planting areas were considered very carefully to use the dampest soil with the most shade to mitigate the risk of future losses.

Nick Day, Woodland and Open Spaces Project Officer, addressed the Panel and confirmed that much had been learned from stakeholders during the project, and advice had been sought from the Colchester Natural History Society who had offered advice on where to locate new trees or replace existing ones. Areas suited to grassland had also been identified and mowing would be reduced in these areas to allow natural regeneration to take place. Nick confirmed that he had contacted every Parish and Town Council in the Borough last May, and approximately seven parishes offered to get involved in the project and take trees for planting. The work had been disrupted by Covid-19 lockdowns, but some planting had been able to take

place, and it was hoped to be able to resume planting in the coming year. In response to a question from Councillor King, Nick confirmed that work was being planned in conjunction with a local landscape architect who had set up a landscape conservation trust. Thanks was expressed by the Panel to The Woodland Trust who had replaced numbers of lost trees, together with providing expertise.

Councillor Nigel Chapman wondered whether it was possible to consider small mammal corridors to enable travel between area of woodland, and he noted that unmown verges may be suitable for this. The Panel heard that a Parish Council in Councillor Chapman's ward had appointed one of their Councillors as a sustainability champion, and he wondered whether there was an opportunity for further engagement on a broader scale via this route. He sought assurances that the tree protectors that were used around saplings were ecologically friendly, and would not be a source of litter in the countryside.

Councillor Cory drew the Panel's attention to the Wivenhoe project, where work had been undertaken with Wivenhoe Town Council to identify areas in which grass cutting regimes could be changed to encourage wildflower growth.

Councillor King confirmed that where it was possible, reduced mowing regimes were being considered to allow nature to take over, and he again highlighted the importance of working with others. The Panel were advised that discussions had taken place with Essex County Council as the Highway Authority with a view to examining the routes into Colchester to see where there was potential for re-wilding to take place. He also confirmed that the tree protectors used were biodegradable.

David Carter, Parks Contracts and Volunteering Specialist, confirmed that roads into Colchester had been looked at to determine where it may be possible to change the grass cutting regime to encourage wildflower areas by reducing cutting from every three weeks to once per year. A number of areas had been identified for a trial this year, but it was emphasised that maintaining road safety and sight lines were crucial in determining suitable areas.

Councillor Davidson expressed his opinion that diversity of habitat was very important, and wondered whether grazing animals had been considered such as rabbits, hares and deer to further enhance the variety of wildlife in the area. He wondered whether any areas had been protected from resident access to support re-wilding, and expressed his pleasure at the proposal to start a tree nursery. He suggested that a cycle path from Mersea to Colchester be considered to allow people to access both the town and beach in a healthy and environmentally friendly manner.

Rosa Tanfield confirmed that the tree nursery was an idea that was being explored currently, and would likely be a community led project as opposed to a Council project. She also confirmed that grazing animals were part of an approach taken in respect of Highwoods Country Park where a particular field there was given to grazing animals to encourage different plant and insect life. The Highwoods area was cited as an example of the use of different strategies in land management relating to hedgerows, meadowland and grazed land.

Councillor Whitehead wondered whether a wildlife and biodiversity audit had been carried out to obtain an overall picture of the biodiversity assets though the borough, noting that as work progressed it would be helpful to have an idea of the impact that it was having on the local area. Councillor King noted the current difficulty in obtaining an overview of data on biodiversity and Rosa Tanfield confirmed that there were a number of audits and surveys that had been carried out by national bodies which gave an overview. The Panel were reminded that the project had changed from being specifically about woodland to incorporate biodiversity, and it was hoped that in the future local residents would be engaged to help monitor sites. Rosa confirmed that monitoring did take place on Council sites to ensure that species were cared for and protected.

Councillor Cory offered his praise to all involved in the project, and considered that the long term environmental benefits which would flow from it would generate a legacy that the Council would be proud of.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

28. New Climate Challenge and Sustainability Strategy Themes (previously named the Climate Emergency Strategic Response) and Midterm Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP 2021-23)

Maggie Ibrahim, Sustainability and Climate Change Manager, attended the meeting to present the report and assist the Panel with its enquiries. The Panel heard that previous meetings has highlighted the need for a separation between the Council's overarching strategy, and the various documents such as the Climate Emergency Action Plan. The Panel were advised that the previous Environment Sustainability Strategy had ended in 2020, and a new strategy document was required which would be a comprehensive strategy for the Council contained within a single document, the Climate Challenge and Sustainability Strategy. The Panel heard that a number of plans needed to be developed, including the Climate Change and Sustainability Strategy 2021-2023, the Climate Emergency Action Plan Update 2021-2023, and the Carbon Management Plan 2021-2026.

The strategy development process would go through a number of different phases, and consultations had been carried out with key Officers and Amphora Company members prior to the Strategy being presented to the Council's Sustainability and Climate Challenge Project Board. The current draft Strategy captures the strategic ambition of the Council in relation to sustainability and carbon reduction, it framed the updated Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) and aligns to the Strategic Plan. The Panel heard how the draft Strategy set out the monitoring and communication of progress for the CEAP and highlights progress against the CEAP in 2019-2020, and contained details of how residents and stakeholders could get in touch and support the Council's sustainability and climate related work. In the future, it was hoped that areas such as targets for each strategic theme could be incorporated, together with carbon emissions reduction targets and engagement and

feedback with local residents, and the Strategy would be developed as progress was made.

There were eight themes contained within the Climate Challenge and Sustainability Strategy (CC&SS), including carbon reduction, production of renewable energy, enhancing biodiversity, facilitating walking cycling and sustainable transport, providing sustainable waste management, enabling partnerships and community action, ensuring sustainable planning and development, and changing the way that the Council works in order to achieve these themes.

The Panel's attention was drawn to highlights of the CEAP 2021-2023, including incorporating the Carbon Management Plan into the Council's building maintenance programme, redevelopment of the Shrub End Depot and carbon literacy training for staff. In addition to this, the idea of a 100% renewable energy tariff was being explored, together with the Council's electric vehicle strategy and procurement together with the necessary infrastructure.

Action points for the forthcoming year were explained to the Panel and included the project to decarbonise Rowan House, the design of a development document for the Local Plan on sustainability and carbon reduction, a staff behaviour change challenge, a review of the natural asset list and an exploration of the remaining actions from the Carbon Management Plan 2016-2020 with recommendations from the Carbon Trust. Planned actions that addressed emissions which were outside of the target included updating the procurement policy to include sustainability, encouraging Colchester Borough Homes to begin the process of converting its fleet into electric vehicles and the development of an emissions tracking system.

Councillor Cory welcomed the CC&SS, and requested that net biodiversity gain was a focus of future strategies, particularly with regard to planning matters. Returning to the point made by Grace Dark as part of her Have Your Say! submission, Councillor Corey requested assurances from Officers that the Solar Together scheme would be promoted through the Council's media channels. Mandy Jones, Assistant Director Place and Client Services, advised the Panel that the decarbonisation work that had taken place with the Council's own housing stock had been targeted to achieve the greatest effect, and solar power was part of this process. It was intended that as part of the decarbonisation programme through the Housing Investment Plan was intended to ensure that all Council housing stock would be energy rated 'C' or above by March 2022.

Councillor Chillingworth expressed his opinion that the CC&SS was an excellent way to explain the Council's actions and themes to the public in a clear and understandable way. He suggested that consideration be given to mentioning the Carbon Trust, together with alternate energy sources in relation to vehicle upgrades as hydrogen may be a source of renewable vehicle energy in the future. He advised the Panel that he had received a request from a Parish Council for a presentation to be delivered outlining what action was being taken by the Council, and how Parish Councils could assist with this, a suggestion that was supported by Councillor Cory. Maggie Ibrahim confirmed that the next step to be taken was concerned with

creating a clear engagement plan around the work that was being undertaken, and she was happy to deliver a presentation to Parish Councils.

RESOLVED that the first phase of the Climate Challenge and Sustainability Strategy Themes, be agreed for consultation on this document, and the updated Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) 2021-2023 be agreed.

29. Government emergency authorisation of use of neonicotinoid based pesticides

Councillor Cory introduced the item, and noted that although the government had decided against the use of neonicotinoid pesticides this year, he still considered it important that the Council consider whether to set a principle in the Borough and look to advise and lobby with Members of Parliament to ensure that this pesticide was not used in the future.

Councillor Chillingworth addressed the Panel and expressed his reservations about the matter being brought before the Panel, explaining that he believed that care should be taken on the use of staff resources, to ensure that these were spent on areas the Council could control or which were within its sphere of interest. He did not wish to see the Panel develop into a campaigning organisation, and felt that the focus should be supporting the excellent work that was being undertaken rather than addressing each environmental problem as it arose. He explained why the use of the pesticide had been approved, which was to combat an aphid that had caused farmers to lose up to 80% of their sugar beet crop (a non-flowering crop), which was devastating to such an important crop, particularly in the eastern counties. Councillor Chillingworth noted that some Members felt strongly on the issue but reiterated his belief that continuing to debate it did not constitute a good use of the time of Officers or this Panel.

Councillor Davidson noted that Councillor Cory, as Leader of the Council, was empowered to take action to protect residents, but he suggested that this was only within the Council's own estate. He pointed out that the pesticide was approved for use in very limited circumstances and for good scientific and economic reasons, and he stated his belief that none of the affected crops were grown on Colchester Borough Council land and suggested that it was not for the Council to attempt to influence the situation without realising the economic and rotational disadvantages are from not using the pesticide. He advised the panel that a resistant form of sugar beet was almost ready for use, but until this was widespread, the importance of the sugar production could not be understated. Although seed dressing was used, this did not have a continuing effect, and without the use of the neonicotinoid pesticide, farmers would have to spray every four days with a systemic insecticide which would have a far greater impact on insect life. In summary, Councillor Davidson proposed that the Panel should be guided by the science on which the government was relying, noting that there was a need for safe food and assurances to the public that farming was being carried out responsibly.

Councillor Cory expressed his appreciation of the points that had been raised, however, he reiterated his belief that the Council had a role beyond its own estate, and suggested that the biodiversity loss that would be caused by a reduction in pollinators was a cause for concern. He wondered whether there was a role in the Council for encouraging responsible farming in the future.

Councillor Goacher acknowledged and praised the work that had been undertaken by the farming community to increase biodiversity and to deal with the decline in the bee population. He expressed his support for the comments of Councillor Cory, noting that the support of private residents was being sought in respect of their gardens, and wondering why this request could not be extended to the farming community. Councillor Goacher believed that the work carried out by the farming community would have a wider effect across the whole borough, and additionally he noted that the neonicotinoid pesticides were used in respect of one crop, and questioned the future need for this crop. It was acknowledged that the decline in bee population was not solely attributed to the use of this pesticide, but was also due to habitat loss, and there had been some excellent schemes within farming to address this loss. Councillor Goacher expressed his concern that the position taken by the government on the use of the chemical was divergent from that taken by the rest of Europe, and he pointed out that simply because using a chemical was legal, it did not follow that using it was right, in the same way that the use of glyphosate was legal, but the Council had still taken a view on this.

Councillor McCarthy advised the Panel that he had read an article on the subject in the publication 'Farmers Weekly', which outlined a biodegradable plastic covering which provided significant protection for sugar beet, and he wondered whether this was something on which Members of Parliament could be lobbied?

In the light of the discussion that had taken place, Councillor Cory wondered whether it would be more appropriate to construct a letter praising the government's current decision not to deploy the pesticide, and offering support for responsible farming. Although he accepted the points made about Officer workload, he also wondered whether issues around responsible farming would be of interest to the public should they be discussed at the Panel in the future.

Councillor Whitehead acknowledged that, in common with other members of the Panel, he was not sufficiently aware of all the technicalities surrounding the issue, although he did agree that the Council had a role to play in giving an opinion and shaping public opinion on environmental issues. He did query the change in the position taken by the government in relation to the use of these pesticides, and although he hesitated to form a complete view on the subject, he did have concerns.

Councillor Cory expressed his desire that the Panel say something that was supportive of the farming industry and the current stance of the government, and that the Panel consider the role of responsible farming in the future and its impact in the borough.

Councillor Davidson addressed the Panel in response to some of the comments that had been made, stressing that the sugar industry was an important one, and

expressing his belief that the use of neonicotinoid pesticides was likely to be only in the short term as different ways of combating the issues were implemented such as resistant crops. He pointed out that research into new methods of providing alternative crop protection was extensive.

Councillor Cory proposed that an item be considered for a future work programme to encourage debate around responsible farming and food sources.

RESOLVED that an item dealing with responsible farming be added to the future work programme of the panel.

30. 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 were advised that a grant had been obtained for £528,250 from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme to enable works to be carried out to increase the energy efficiency and decarbonise Rowan House. The works were to include installing an air source heat pump, a mechanical ventilation and heat recovery system, a building management system, extra roof insulation and LEF lighting giving an estimated emission saving of 139.6 tonnes of CO₂, which constituted a considerable portion of the Council's overall carbon footprint.

The Panel were advised of the Council's participation in the Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery Scheme, which was a consortium grant bid led by Essex County Council, and which sought to provide funding of up to £10,000 per household to install insulation which would improve the energy efficiency of homes. The funding was available to households with low income and the energy efficiency rating of their home was below an 'E' rating. The programme was to run until June 2021, and funds would be distributed on a first come, first served basis. The Council had promoted the scheme through social media channels and via Community 360.

A pilot behaviour change challenge had been launched for staff called 'Hero for Zero', which encouraged staff to adopt an environmentally friendly behaviour for a month, with the aim of instilling behaviour change in the long term. The Panel also heard that a survey had been launched on 8 March to understand how residents heard about the Council's work on the climate emergency, and to raise awareness of opportunities for engagement with the Council's work on the green agenda. The survey was to close on 5 April 2021.

The Panel's attention was drawn to a guide that had been produced for householders which contained useful information on measures that could be taken within the home to increase energy efficiency and lower its environmental impact.

Officers had been working with Colchester Business Centre to assist with the development of an element of their business strategy including corporate environmental responsibility in order to reduce the environmental impact of their operations. Officers were working on developing a key performance indicator to be included in the strategy.

Rangers had been taking several actions to reduce the environmental impact of the teams work, such as using canoes for litter picks in the river, and they had been researching an electric gator vehicle to use in conjunction with an e-cargo bike. Preliminary plans were also being considered for improvement works at the lake and island just outside Castle Park for the benefit of wildlife and carbon capture.

Councillor Cory offered his thanks to all involved in the bid in relation to Rowan House, and encouraged the promotion of the Green Homes Grant scheme through all available channels, if this was not already being done. In relation to the 'Hero for Zero' scheme, Councillor Cory wondered whether consideration could be given to promoting more environmentally friendly diets.

Councillor Goacher enquired what the current position was with regard to electric points for vehicles, as he had received an enquiry from a resident. Rory Doyle, Assistant Director – Environment, updated the Panel and explained that a significant amount of work had been carried out around vehicle charging posts within the Council's own fleet at both Rowan House and the Council's depot, and thought was being given to looking at electric vehicle infrastructure in some of the car parks. A wider strategy around electric vehicle charging was required, looking at the transport strategy in general as opposed to a piecemeal approach, and electric vehicle charging was being encouraged through planning and new development work.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

31. Work Programme 2020-2021

RESOLVED that the contents of the work programme be noted, and that additional agreed items be added to the work programme for the future.