
Minutes of the meeting of the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held in Committee Room 1 County Hall, Chelmsford, CM1 1QH on Thursday, 21 September 2017

Present:

Councillor E Johnson (Chairman)	Councillor B Massey
Councillor T Ball	Councillor C Pond
Councillor M Durham	Councillor A Sheldon
Councillor R Gadsby	Councillor W Schmitt
Councillor S Hillier	Councillor J Young
Councillor D Kendall	

The following Officer was present in support throughout the meeting:

Robert Fox - Scrutiny Officer

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Stephen Canning, Paul Honeywood and Ron Pratt.

2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 22nd June were agreed as an accurate record and signed by the chairman.

3 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Mark Durham declared an interest with regard to item 5 on the agenda as the Cabinet Member Deputy to Councillor Susan Barker. HE also declared an interest as the Maldon District Council representative on the Essex Countywide Travellers Unit (ECTU).

Councillor Ricki Gadsby declared an interest with regard to items 6 and 7 on the agenda as the Cabinet Member Deputy to Councillor Sue Lissimore.

Councillor Tony Ball declared an interest with regard to item 7 on the agenda as the Cabinet Member Deputy to Councillor Ray Gooding in relation to the education of the gypsy and traveller communities.

Councillor Julie Young declared an interest in relation to agenda item 5 as her husband as a member of the Board of Firstsite in Colchester.

Councillor David Kendall declared an interest in relation to agenda item 8 as a member of the Essex Bus Forum.

Councillor Andrew Sheldon declared an interest in relation to agenda item 6 as he is working for a company which is involved in development work in Colchester.

Councillor Wendy Schmitt declared an interest in relation to agenda item 7 as the Braintree District Council member on ECTU.

Councillor Chris Pond declared an interest in relation to agenda item 6 as a member of Epping Forest District Council and Loughton Town Council.

Councillor Stephen Hillier declared an interest in relation to agenda item 8 as the Chairman of the Basildon Bus Forum.

Councillor Eddie Johnson declared an interest in relation to agenda item 8 as the former Cabinet Member for Highways.

4 Questions from the Public

There were no public questions.

5 Culture Heritage and Tourism in Essex

The Committee considered report PSEG/15/17 and a presentation by Councillor Susan Barker, Cabinet Member for Culture, Communities and Customer, providing an overview culture, heritage and tourism in Essex.

Councillor Barker explained that the 2010/11 report provided as background paper **PSEGC//17** for the Committee is regarded as largely out-of-date as currently the County Council is in a very different place with regard to culture, heritage and tourism,

Councillor Barker opened that the county needs to make sure that Essex's heritage and culture is preserved and showcased; and to that end the County Council is working with the borough, city and district councils as well as Arts organisations to improve the offer in the county. Culture, heritage and tourism provide a £3.1 billion contribution to the economy of the county and provides 61,000 jobs according to Visit Essex. The county annually has over 51 million visitors. Councillor Barker informed the Committee she would respond in terms of how many of these are full-time, part-time and volunteer posts.

The County Council has strategic financial relationships with the Mercury Theatre and Firstsite in Colchester; and the Stow Maries World War I Aerodrome.

The Essex Record Office (ERO) is undergoing digitisation presently; and this has coincided with a drop in visitor numbers; however, there has been an increase in visitors to access Ancestors On-line. There has also been an increase in use of the ERO for marriages and as a conference venue. Duplicate registration certificates are also increasing. There is a challenge to ensure the ERO remains viable – is it the right service in the right location? Councillor Barker stated the ERO will continue in some form. Councillor Julie Young raised a concern from a resident that raising the entry fee and photographic charges would further reduce attendance at the ERO? Councillor Barker responded that there is no evidence that

increased fees are having a negative impact on attendance at the ERO and suggested the resident concern is raised directly with her and she would respond directly. Councillor Barker also stated, in response to a question from Councillor Young, that she would look into security systems in libraries to prevent historical documents being stolen.

In response to a question Councillor Barker stated she would provide a written response with regard to the current level of funding and the funding streams used for the Victorian History Society, which has an arrangement to use space at the ERO.

Councillor Barker stated, though not within her portfolio, Essex Country Parks are making an operating surplus and there are many marketing opportunities for the service. Councillor David Kendall suggested that public transport links are an issue with regard to country parks.

Following a question from Councillor Ricki Gadsby with regard to the Waltham Abbey Gunpowder Mills and suitable guest accommodation Councillor Barker responded that hotel and guesthouse offers need to be improved and more tourist accommodation should be included within local plans. Additionally, with regard to smaller heritage venues, Councillor Barker raised member awareness of the Essex Pass which offers many promotional deals on its website and considered that more could be done with Essex Pass to promote other Essex heritage sites. Councillor Barker agreed to look at the distribution of accommodation in the county and respond with the district that has the most accommodation.

Councillor Andrew Sheldon asked whether there is any way the County Council could provide ways of funding the administration and set-up costs for smaller organisations when initiating projects? Councillor Sheldon also stated that there is local appetite for capitalising on the Viking Battle of Benfleet which was featured in a recent television costume drama. Councillor Barker stated there is available officer resource in the cultural development team to provide advice to organisations on how they might go about organising and establishing events.

Councillor Chris Pond questioned whether there are plans for the ERO and the library service to be grouped together and work to common objectives, as recommended in the 2011 report to the Committee? Councillor Barker stated it is preferable to have a local resource in a local place; and this is the case in libraries throughout Essex. However, there is a balance that needs to be had and she would welcome any specific ideas or thoughts and challenged the Committee to look at the potential options.

With regard to available hotel accommodation Councillor Pond stated ECC should request that sufficient guest accommodation is considered in local plans.

Councillor Kendall expressed how crucial signage to tourist spots is; and that more clarity in terms of this with borough/city/district councils would be

helpful. Councillor Barker responded that this would be a highways issue; however, she acknowledged that consistency is needed throughout the county.

With regard to digitising the records service Councillor Kendall questioned whether this is really a benefit for the customer? He suggested there needs to be a raising of awareness amongst schools that the resource at the ERO exists. Councillor Barker responded people do like to search records online; however, the original records can still be viewed if so wished. The ERO does have an outreach officer for schools.

Councillor Wendy Schmitt informed the Committee that Braintree District Council currently has a Task and Finish Group looking at tourism; and that she would forward the presentation the Group received recently to Councillor Barker.

Councillor Barker closed by stating she would be pleased to receive ideas from the Committee about what Members would wish to see in libraries as part of a wider consultation on the service.

The Chairman of the Committee thanked Councillor Barker and Phillip Cruddace for their contribution and confirmed there was no further immediate actions required by the Committee on this item, other than those noted above.

6 Large housing development

The Committee considered report PSEG/16/17 and a presentation by Graham Thomas, Head of Comm Growing Essex Future Development, providing an overview of large housing developments in Essex. Councillor Sue Lissimore, Cabinet Member for Housing, Property and Planning and her deputy Cabinet Member, Councillor Lesley Wagland were also in attendance for this item.

Councillor Lissimore explained to the Committee the County Council is working collaboratively to provide good quality local plans and define the best sites for planning. There are 108,000 homes at risk of flooding in Essex mostly as a result of standing water.

In the plans from 2016-36 180,000 new homes are needed and Local Authorities are scaling-up housing growth and balanced communities – areas have been identified for strategic growth.

Essex County Council is engaged in planning for new settlements with the most advanced plans being for Braintree, Colchester and Tendring with a jointly developed local plan within a single document.

There is, currently, no co-ordinated response to large-scale housing applications but it is hoped that in early spring 2018 there will be something in place to assist stronger local plans.

In response to a question from Councillor Kendall, Councillor Lissimore informed the Committee that there was a recent Section 106 (s106) planning portfolio leaders meeting which had 100% attendance from across the county. There was general consensus that the county, as a whole, has not done well enough with s106 monies in the past. With regard to affordable housing the County Council has been doing a great deal of work to develop plots that have not been available for development in the past and Essex Housing will build to better specifications. Cross-border work is also important with particular regard to garden communities.

Councillor Mark Durham stated Maldon District Council plans were adopted at the beginning of July 2017 with affordable housing being critical. Councillor Lissimore explained that there is apocryphal evidence that some borough/city/district councils have dropped the county aspects from developments. The County Council will need to make those local authorities fully aware that developments are taken together. An Essex Design Guide is being produced and this will be a world-class document.

Following a question from Councillor Sheldon about housing development which cuts across three districts he was advised to write to Councillor Lissimore to organise a meeting.

Councillor Pond, with regard to the previous item on the agenda as well as this, expressed that hotel and tourist accommodation should have more emphasis placed on them in the local plans to ensure continued economic growth for the county. Councillor Pond also called for greater integration in the development of garden communities; and stated that public transport should be considered despite local authorities having very little control over it. Councillor Lissimore agreed and stated that the County Council needs to ensure there is connectivity with existing urban locations.

Councillor Lissimore in response to a question from Councillor Young stated there is a meeting with Essex MPs in October 2017 to discuss the development of garden communities and that she is committed to visibility.

Councillor Stephen Hillier expressed if the concentration is solely on large scale development that the County Council needs to be mindful of the effects on infrastructure within smaller communities; and reminded the Committee that in largely urban areas there are no neighbourhood plans. Councillor Lissimore responded the neighbourhood plans of Parish Councils are fully considered by the borough/city/district councils and where needed developments are considered. She continued a mixed economy of garden communities and development in smaller communities is needed to meet the housing need.

The Chairman of the Committee thanked Councillor Lissimore and Graham Thomas for their contribution and confirmed there was no further immediate actions required by the Committee on this item, other than those noted above.

7

The Countywide Strategy on Gypsy and Traveller Groups

The Committee considered report PSEG/17/17 and a presentation by Stephen Andrews, Essex Countywide Traveller Unit Manager, providing an overview of the countywide strategy on Gypsy and Traveller Groups in Essex. Councillor Sue Lissimore, Cabinet Member for Housing, Property and Planning and her deputy Cabinet Member, Councillor Lesley Wagland were also in attendance for this item.

The Committee was informed that eleven of the fourteen local authority areas in greater Essex are members of ECTU which was established in October 2012.

Councillor Hillier questioned whether unauthorised encampments are on public land as private landowners do not have a statutory obligation to consider the welfare of any encampment whereas local authorities do, under the Criminal Justice and public Order Act, 1994. Councillor Lissimore responded that the general public does not care if it is private or public land that an encampment has been set up on – they just want the situation dealt with. There is a partnership approach to unauthorised encampments and ECTU give advice on securing land to reduce the number. Essex has been seen as a soft touch and the message is now getting across that we do not go lightly on unauthorised encampments.

Councillor Schmitt raised the difficulties of getting unauthorised travellers to move on from land; and, at times, the interventions of MPs is unwelcome as they criticise the police and local authorities whose conduct is by the letter of the law. Councillor Lissimore and Mr Andrews responded many of the travellers are not residents of Essex and the message that unauthorised encampments in Essex are not acceptable needs to be reinforced.

Councillor Kendall stated that from a resident point-of-view ECTU can seem like a social and welfare service for gypsy and traveller groups. He stated ECTU has been involved in moving encampments on but they reappear in a different place and there are no prosecutions forthcoming despite transgression of planning laws and fly-tipping. He questioned what stops a transit site becoming a permanent one? Councillor Lissimore responded this is her number one priority. There is currently a waiting list of 300 for permanent sites and welfare is available on these. ECTU continues to deliver a robust service within the confines of the law with regard to unauthorised encampments. More needs to be done with borough/city/district councils to deal with fly-tipping. Second-tier authorities only pay £7,000 per year to be members of ECTU and they have ongoing costs as a result of unauthorised encampments. Management is critical in terms of transit sites. There are planning conditions that mean a transit site cannot become a permanent site unless planning consent is given. Fly-tipping and planning are borough/city/district council issues and not within the remit of ECTU Mr Andrews responded.

Councillor Tony Ball stated that education is key and that he is concerned

that many gypsy and traveller children are not accessing compulsory education. He queried what ECTU is doing with schools to ensure children are firstly accessing education and, secondly, continuing within education? Councillor Lissimore replied she would like to see as close as possible to 100% student attendance from the gypsy and traveller communities; however, when questioned many parents state their children are home tutored. Whilst many gypsy and traveller families wish for their children to have a permanent education there are realities that have to be dealt with in the communities.

Councillor Ball responded within the settled communities action would be taken if children did not attend school, and, therefore, the same rules do not seem to apply regarding school attendance and safeguarding.

Councillor Durham raised the charging policy of ECTU in terms of proportionality with some districts having more need of ECTU than smaller authorities. He stated his view was that it was a bad idea to reduce the charge a couple of years ago. Councillor Lissimore responded ECTU is an insurance policy if a local authority area is in need of intervention.

Councillor Sheldon informed the Committee that there are no unauthorised encampments in the Castle Point Borough Council area. However, he asked whether there is any mechanism, through local authorities working together, to enable the district authority to serve a notice of eviction rather than ECC on ECC land? Councillor Lissimore responded that ECC cannot act without definitive proof of land ownership, and, as such, the person serving the notice has to be present in Court. Partnership working is key in gathering better and quicker responses on encampments.

The Chairman of the Committee thanked Councillor Lissimore and Stephen Andrews and confirmed there was no further immediate actions required by the Committee on this item.

8 Place Services And Economic Growth Policy And Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2017/18

The Committee noted report PSEG/18/18 concerning the Committee's work programme.

The Committee confirmed Councillor Chris Pond as Chairman of the Localism and Subsidiarity Task and Finish Group and Councillor's Kendall and Sheldon would also serve on the Group. A further nominee would be sought.

Councillor Pond stated his aim was to conclude the Group's review by Christmas.

9 Date of Next Meeting

The Committee noted that the next meeting will be held on Thursday 19th

October.

There being no urgent business the meeting closed at 13:20.

Chairman