

Annual Report to Overview & Scrutiny Committee 19th October 2023

New projects

Chelmsford Garden Community: I was appointed to the Shadow Community Council in Summer 2022 and attended monthly meetings until after its formal establishment on 1st April 2023. It has rapidly established itself as an active voice for residents. I continue to Chair the Community Liaison Group for the area, set up to ensure that local Councillors of all three tiers and other stakeholders are kept informed about progress with the Garden Community development plans.

I also sit on the CGC Delivery Board, along with the Cabinet Member for a Growing Chelmsford, our CEO and Planning officers, ECC representatives and the nominees of the three developers. Discussions are ongoing about the oversight and management of the public spaces, with some controversy still over the amount and scale of management fees charged to residents. We are keen to keep these to the minimum possible, while still having to comply with the NPPF.

North Essex Councils: I reported last year that discussions had just started to assess the possible benefits of working more closely together e.g. on shared services. This had grown out of the joint working that we have done in North Essex Economic Partnership (which was reported to September Cabinet). This includes the eight district-tier councils (plus ECC) that are not in the Assoc. of South Essex Local Authorities (Basildon, Brentwood, Castle Point, Rochford, Southend and Thurrock).

Civic Offices: a year ago, Group Leaders agreed that Members didn't need as much office space as we had been used to, pre-Covid. This decision was fed into the review being undertaken by the Building Services team to consider all options for remodelling the Civic Offices complex. Each department is reviewing their office needs. This may create more lettable space including for meetings and external hire.

LGA oversight of changes to election law: I've been appointed to a cross-party LGA working group to make representations to ministers about the implications of changes to the electoral process, including voter ID and new rules on absent voting. We've met four times this year and in that capacity I also recently met with the Chair of the Electoral Commission.

Housing crisis: the MTFS report to October Cabinet explained the scale of the rapidly growing problem with homelessness and temporary accommodation. The Cabinet Member for a Fairer Chelmsford leads on this (from both a housing and property perspective) but proposals for action are consistently on my agenda, especially given the implications for the council's finances.

Two years ago, our CEO and I started quarterly meeting with the CEO and Directors of CHP, to seek out ways we could jointly address some of the challenges e.g. CHP homes left empty for too long. We subsequently held a meeting with a number of the registered social landlords that operate in Chelmsford and intend to build on those links, for example I recently met with Clarion housing.

Refugees: a year ago, we had recently started responding to the consequences of many arrivals into Chelmsford, fleeing the war in Ukraine. This work has been ongoing, with the homelessness avoidance team involved in rematching Ukrainians to new sponsors. In May 2023 we began employing

one of our Ukrainian residents in the housing team, to improve our liaison and support for the families.

Then in Spring 2023 the Home Office announced they would end the housing of Afghans in hotels. When they first arrived in the second half of 2021, we had warned that there could be an implication for housing authorities. (I mentioned this in my report to you last year.) The Home Office never really recognised, let alone planned for, the issue.

I raised these concerns in webinars with Ministers in April and May but they failed to acknowledge the scale of the problem that they were creating. Thus, on 9th August 2023, nine Afghan families in the Chelmsford hotel became homeless and thus the responsibility of CCC. Sadly but not surprisingly, there were no properties available in the Chelmsford district, so they all had to be rehoused in other parts of the country.

As members will know from the question to full council in July, we were informed that around 300 asylum seekers would be arriving in the district (this is now likely to be rather more). Essex County Council pleaded with the Home Office to not send any school-age children to Chelmsford as there are no school places. Initially they agreed but later said they could not stick to that commitment.

At first, the Home Office also said that it was unlikely that any of the asylum seekers would have their asylum claim determined while they were in Chelmsford. This has also not been adhered to, meaning that many more people will become entitled to apply to CCC for homelessness support.

Along with other Leaders, I consistently raise these concerns at the Essex migration task force meetings, convened periodically by the Leader of ECC (who have responsibility for all refugees in Essex).

Invest in Chelmsford: last November I spoke at an event that CCC organised, aimed at encouraging businesses to relocate to and invest in Chelmsford, as part of our aim to grow the number of jobs in Chelmsford at the same rate as the number of new homes.

Devolution: I reported on this last year and we have all subsequently been briefed on the latest proposals for a “Level Two” deal. ECC, Southend and Thurrock remain in the lead on this and so we wait to see what further details are added to the proposal, which they hope to publish on “Essex Day” (26th October) and be confirmed in the Chancellor’s Autumn Statement.

“Our Chelmsford – Our Plan” needs to be reviewed following the election. The current version was adopted by Council in January 2020 and can be seen here: <https://chelmsford.gov.uk/ourplan>

It is intended to present a summary version to Policy Board on 2nd November, revise in the light of Members' comments and then report to Council on 6th December.

It will continue with our aims of creating a greener, fairer and more connected Chelmsford. If Members have any comments at this meeting about CCC strategic objectives that might be included in OCOP, I will be pleased to receive them.

Summary of the regular meetings attended / roles carried out

1. Chair of Cabinet

After the May election, we had a 'cabinet reshuffle' and new portfolio holders have been briefed on, and settled into, their roles.

Cabinet members have continued the aim of being as transparent as possible, by sending to their Shadows from Opposition those papers that are coming to Cabinet, in advance of formal publication. Shadow Cabinet members have also been advised that they can meet Cabinet Members and Directors at other times for briefings on current issues.

Cabinet meets with Senior Management Team before each cabinet meeting, and at other times to look in detail at some of the departments with the biggest financial challenges, to identify areas for service improvement and possible savings, given the challenges in the MTFS.

2. Liaison with the Chief Executive

The Deputy Leader and I meet almost every week with the Chief Executive for brief updates on current issues that have been considered by Senior Management Team or arising from external contacts with businesses or other parts of the public sector.

3. The Local Government Association (LGA)

The Leader represents the Council at the annual LGA conference and some other meetings in between. The LGA is mainly a way to share ideas and gain insight on common issues of the day. Additionally, all 50 Leaders from the East of England LGA meet three times a year and I am one of five who have been elected to the EELGA Management Board, which meets quarterly to oversee the work of the EELGA staff. Following the May elections, I am now Vice Chair of EELGA and we have just completed the recruitment process for a new CEO of EELGA.

In February, EELGA launched a significant report into how the region could address the "Levelling Up" Agenda and identified five key areas (of the Government's 12 missions) where the region is currently underperforming. It was presented to MPs and the DLUHC Minister at a meeting in Westminster.

4. The Essex Leaders and Chief Executives Group

The Leaders of the 12 Districts, two Unitaries, Essex CC, the PFCC and their Chief Executives normally meet four times a year to discuss areas of common interest. A key topic at the last couple of meetings has been devolution (mentioned above).

5. Essex CC / Chelmsford CC Highways Liaison

There used to be regular "5 a-side" meetings between the two councils. Unfortunately, those meetings have not restarted since Covid but we are trying to reestablish them. I also serve on the Army & Navy Taskforce, along with the local County Councillors and the MP. After nothing happening for some months, a meeting is due to be held shortly.

6. The "One Chelmsford" Board

This comprises representatives of key stakeholders in Chelmsford – the NHS, Police, Fire, MP, CVS, ARU, business, ECC and CCC. It meets three times a year to discuss areas of common interest. At recent meetings we have discussed common objectives and a shared purpose for

coming together, which is now being progressed working with a consultant from the <https://www.thrivingplacesindex.org/>

7. Waterside Panel

The Waterside Panel exists to oversee plans for the old gasworks / Lockside area. The first priority has been moving the High Pressure Gas Reduction System and gas main to enable development and then the new road and bridge (from Wharf Road to Baddow Road). The contract to build the bridge was the subject of a decision at Council in July.

As reported to Cabinet, no decision has been made yet on how to redevelop this important, city centre regeneration site. Our aim is to deliver a flourishing and exciting new community and to do so in partnership with a development partner.

8. CCC Working Groups

- a) Mayoral: The Leaders of the three Groups, the Mayor, Deputy Mayor and officers meet about every two months to consider the upcoming programme of civic events.
- b) Constitution: this is a little more ad hoc but has met a number of times over the last year, making proposals to Governance Committee and Council.

9. The Employment and Joint Staff Committees

These have certain limited functions as specified in the Constitution. The Employment Committee meets for the first time since March 2019 on 12th October.

10. External spokesperson

I am contacted from time to time by local media. We no longer issue media releases *per se* but have switched to delivering a great deal more content online at citylife.chelmsford.gov.uk

I attended the High Sheriff's Annual Awards in March and his summer reception for the Essex public sector.

I am happy to take questions on this report at the meeting or at other times.