

Fifth meeting of the A127 Economic Growth Corridor Task Force

Date: Tuesday 8 September 2020

Minutes prepared by: Gareth Burton

Location: MS Teams virtual meeting

Participants

Cllr Kevin Bentley (KB) – Deputy Leader of Essex County Council and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

Cllr Ron Woodley (RW) – Deputy Leader of Southend Council

Cllr Simon Wootton (SW) – Leader of Rochford District Council

Cllr Norman Smith (NS) – Leader of Castle Point Borough Council

Cllr Chris Hossack (CH) – Leader of Brentwood Borough Council

Stephen Metcalfe MP (SM) – MP for South Basildon and East Thurrock

Rebecca Harris MP (RH) – MP for Castle Point

Lisa McArdle (LM) – attending on behalf of James Duddridge MP (MP for Rochford and Southend)

Cllr Mike Steptoe (MS) – Essex County and Rochford District Councillor

Cllr Andrew Sheldon (AS) - Essex County and Castle Point Borough Councillor

Cllr Malcolm Buckley (MB) - Essex County and Basildon Borough Councillor

Michael Read-Leah (MRL) – Department for Transport

Tom Lawman (TL) – Highways England

Chris Stevenson (CS) – Head of Network Development, Essex County Council

Mark Robinson (MR) – Principal Transport and Infrastructure Planner, Essex County Council

Alastair Southgate (AS) – Head of Future Transport Strategy, Essex County Council

Hilde Dahmer (HD) – Senior Strategy Adviser, Essex County Council

Tim Rushton (TR) – Project Manager, Essex Highways

Gareth Burton (GB) – Stakeholder Engagement and Communications Principal, Essex Highways

Geoff Loader (GL) – Director of Stakeholder Engagement and Communications, Essex Highways

Sean Perry (SP) – Divisional Director, Essex Highways

Martin Whittles (MW) – Technical Director, Essex Highways

Item 1: Welcome and opening remarks by Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chair

KB thanked people for joining the meeting and invited attendees to introduce themselves. He recapped on the project to date and emphasised that the A127 is the transport spine and economic corridor for South Essex.

KB remarked that for a number of years the A127 had not received the attention it deserved and that other major roads in the county had, citing the A12 and M11 as examples and referencing planned investment in the A120. He explained there were various reasons for this, and that housing growth and economic growth were crucial in securing investment.

KB stated that the focus of the A127 Task Force was now on pressing the Government to take back the A127 into the Strategic Road Network to make sure it was properly funded in the future but stressed that the county council was in no way absolving itself from its responsibilities.

He added that the highways authorities, Essex County Council and Southend Borough Council, would never have the level of funding required to invest in the scale of improvements needed. KB stated that the councils were making some initial improvements, but that far greater investment was needed.

He concluded that the A127 is the only A road of its size in the county that is not trunked and stressed that it needed to be brought back into the Strategic Road Network.

RW agreed and stated that it was important to allow South Essex to grow and expand.

KB reiterated the importance of investment in the A127 to enable growth and acknowledged it was particularly important for Southend given London Southend Airport, the neighbouring business park and planned garden community.

KB stated that getting the road re-trunked and progressing this at a pace must be a team effort and suggested that the Task Force now met every six weeks. He added that a smaller working group, chaired by Cllr Andrew Sheldon, was being set up to work through the details of the re-trunking proposals and to establish what needed to be done to put forward the case. He emphasised that help was needed from those attending the meeting and that business support would be crucial.

KB and TR previewed the remainder of the meeting agenda.

Item 2: Re-trunking process (MW)

MW gave an overview of the project so far, explaining that the task force had looked at the issues on the A127 and had agreed on a set of objectives for the future of the A127 corridor. He emphasised that the project team had initially been encouraged to look very broadly at potential improvements to the corridor and to put sustainable transport at the forefront. He added that there were lots of ideas generated as part of that work and that this work is still valuable to support wider growth aspirations across South Essex.

MW stated that this included the MRN junction improvement schemes, which were being progressed separately, as well as a long list of ideas about how the A127 could be made fit for purpose. He explained that re-trunking the A127 was the first step in being able to progress with any longer-term and more comprehensive improvements.

MW explained his understanding of the purpose of a trunk road. He stated that, based on the definition, the purpose of the strategic road network was to provide safe and reliable journeys and connectivity between main centres of populations, ports and airports.

MW said that, based on the definition, re-trunking the A127 in South Essex made sense. He added that the size of the towns and populations, London Southend Airport and the strong opportunities for growth in South Essex all contributed to a robust case.

MW explained that the project team had also looked at how busy the A127 was and compared traffic flow with other trunk roads and the M11. He said data showed that the flow was actually higher on the A127 than on the M11 along certain sections, adding to the already strong case for re-trunking.

MW stated that, in terms of performance, the A127 also left some South Essex communities relatively peripheral and needed a series of significant improvements. He said the A127 being part of the Strategic Road Network would also improve capability to respond to incidents because you would create a triangle of roads including the M25, A127 and A13.

MW said there were also a number of other strong arguments for re-trunking the A127, in addition to the definition and purpose of the Strategic Road Network. He reiterated that local authority funding restrictions meant the authorities would be unable to make the investment needed. He added that the growth agenda was also a strong argument and that if the A127 was re-trunked then Essex County Council could focus its efforts on local sustainable transport improvements to help take local trips off the A127.

TR outlined the proposed approach to presenting a case for re-trunking the A127 and explained that the project team would be working alongside partners to develop a robust evidence base that would inform a strategic case for submission to the DfT. He added that this would be complemented by work to seek regional and local support for the proposals, and that the case would be made for the re-trunking proposal to be included as part of Transport East's Transport Strategy and Investment Plan.

KB indicated that the pace of the project was important and reiterated the need for Transport East to be behind the proposals. He also said that seeking support from businesses, like had been done with the A120 project, was critically important.

RW asked for an idea of the kind of schemes that the project team had in mind to improve the capacity of the A127 in the future, particularly in light of planned housing and business growth.

TR advised that a lot of work had been carried out previously in identifying problems and potential long-term options for the A127 corridor.

MW added that there were a host of potential options in the longer term, as well as initial efficiency improvements that would be possible through maintenance and technology if the road was trunked. He added that there were already some junction improvement schemes progressing separately.

KB requested images of the potential future improvements for the next meeting

Action – Project team to review what images/information could be shared about future options at the next task force meeting

NS referred to a business that he was aware was willing to invest in A127 improvements and asked for an update on any discussions that had taken place with Essex County Council officers.

Action - AS said he was unaware of the discussions but would seek an update and report back to NS

CS said that while there were similarities with the A120 project, there were also significant differences. He said that, for example, he did not feel a full option study should be developed for the A127 or any consultation because future improvements then became an Essex County Council scheme. He suggested that, while the project team should look to show that the A127 had the potential to form an important link in the Strategic Road Network and that there were ideas for possible improvements, it should not be carrying out all the technical work.

Item 3: Communications and Engagement (GB)

GB reiterated that initial engagement would focus on working with Transport East to secure its support and have the trunking proposals included in its Transport Strategy. He emphasised that the project team would be looking to engage with Transport East as early as possible for full endorsement of the proposals.

GB said that a wider communications and engagement campaign, similar to one run for the A120 project in Essex, was also being developed to make the case for re-trunking. He outlined the intention that the campaign would be visible and public-facing, with a strong focus on growth in South Essex, resolving the issues on the A127 and the role upgrading the A127 would play in unlocking the area's growth potential. He added that the campaign would seek to complement work by the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA), and that support would be sought from the district and borough councils, MPs and businesses to present a unified, consistent and well-supported proposal. GB stressed that having a consistent campaign narrative that resonated with partners and the public would be very important.

GB said that work had started on an initial brochure to outline the case for re-trunking. He explained that it was still in draft form but would include an overview of the A127, planned economic and housing growth in South Essex and the need for investment in the corridor to unlock growth.

GB said that support would again be sought from businesses and other partners to add impact to the brochure and the wider campaign. He said it would be shared with the task force at a later date.

Action – KB requested that examples of the A120 campaign were sent to MPs for their information

AS stressed the need to manage public expectations when developing the communications campaign and suggested that it could be some time before any significant investment in the A127, even after it was adopted. He emphasised that it was, therefore, worth highlighting smaller improvements and quick wins such as planned junction improvements.

GL said that a narrative and key message briefing had worked well for the A120 campaign and something similar would be developed for this project so that the Task Force and other partners were consistent in what they say. He said this consistency would also ensure the message was more powerful.

CH suggested that, in addition to MPs, businesses and the district/borough councils, the project team should also work with partner organisations such as Opportunity South Essex and Thames Estuary Envoy, Kate Willard.

KB agreed and said plans would be shared with them and other partners once they had been developed.

Item 4: MRN projects update (TR)

TR explained that a Major Road Network (MRN) bid had been submitted to the DfT for three proposed junction improvement schemes at Warley, Halfway House and the Fortune of War and had been approved to proceed to Strategic Outline Business Case, as announced in the Spring Budget earlier this year. He added that each scheme had previously been developed to various design stages and combined into the pre-SOBC submission.

TR said that, in addition to the three junctions included in the initial MRN bid, there had also been discussions with the DfT about proposed improvements to the Pound Lane junction, and the DfT had advised it was happy to receive an additional MRN bid for that junction as well.

He said the project at Fairglen was also progressing and due to start on site next year.

TR said that each of the MRN junction improvement schemes was being looked at individually and pulled together into one package, with the aim of submitting an Option Assessment Report and SOBC early next year.

He provided a high-level timeline for the project but stressed that it was difficult to be too precise at this stage because the project included three schemes and construction may have to be staggered to minimise disruption on the network. An estimated construction start date of early 2024 was given, subject to planning and other processes.

Item 5: Any other business

KB reiterated that pace was important and that he expected the new working group to meet monthly and drive forward the project campaign, with the Task Force meeting every six weeks. He asked attendees to be as flexible as possible in their availability for future meetings.

KB asked attendees for questions or any other business.

SM suggested that the resilience of the network was of paramount importance and should form a crucial part of the case for re-trunking and referred to the need to also consider the impacts of the planned new Lower Thames Crossing.

SM suggested a potential charging clean air zone in Basildon might not be top of the Government's agenda any more but questioned whether it might be possible to bring forward improvements to the Fortune of War junction to improve air quality in the area.

CS advised that Essex County Council was still working with JAQU on the Basildon air quality project and hoped a charging clean air zone would not be required.

KB reiterated his stance that he would not implement a charging clean air zone unless he was directed to do so by the minister. He added that progress with the Fortune of War scheme was dependent on funding.

Action – Project team to review previous funding discussions regarding the Fortune of War scheme

KB asked that if any MPs wanted to be on the working group they should contact Cllr Andrew Sheldon.

RH suggested that there was a need to get the messaging right for any communications campaign to ensure it resonated with the public.

KB agreed and said he expected economic growth and jobs to be the main message in demonstrating the need for investment and re-trunking.

RH said that all opportunities to improve access on and off the A127 should be explored to reduce the amount of time people needed to be on the road itself and make it more user-friendly.

AS acknowledged that the pace of the project was going to be very quick and said he looked forward to working with everyone as chair of the new working group.

MS asked whether there were any updates regarding improvements to the wider A127 corridor and, in particular, the railway lines.

KB acknowledged that was important and said that the council would continue lobbying for rail improvements but stressed that the focus of the Task Force was now on re-trunking the A127.

KB thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting.