

## **Sixth meeting of the A127 Economic Growth Corridor Task Force**

Date: Thursday 22 October 2020

Minutes prepared by: Gareth Burton

Location: MS Teams virtual meeting

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### **Participants**

Cllr Kevin Bentley (KB) – Deputy Leader of Essex County Council and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure (also Chair of the A127 Task Force)

Cllr Andrew Sheldon (AS) - Essex County and Castle Point Borough Councillor (also Chair of the A127 Working Group)

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

Cllr Jack Ferguson (JF) – Basildon Borough Councillor

Selina Short (SS) – Attending on behalf of John Baron MP

Sara Zygmunt (SZ) – Attending on behalf of Rebecca Harris MP

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

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

Simon Amor (SA) – Head of Planning and Development, Highways England

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

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

Alan Lindsay (AL) - Transportation Planning and Infrastructure Manager, 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

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

KB thanked people for joining the meeting and for the progress made with the project to date, emphasising that pace was important.

KB stated that infrastructure must be at the heart of discussions and people's minds as Local Plans came together. He remarked that Essex County Council and Southend Borough Council, the relevant highways authorities, would never be able to afford the scale of upgrades needed on the A127, which was why it was critical that the road went back into the Strategic Road Network.

KB thanked AS for establishing the A127 Working Group and invited him to provide a progress update.

### **Item 2: Working group update (AS)**

AS said that the Working Group had now met for the first time and would play an important role in helping put the case for re-trunking the A127 in front of the right people. He stated that the group had also discussed the benefits of re-trunking the A127 for hospitals, businesses and economic growth.

AS advised that the working group had begun to look at creating a roadmap for the project, which would eventually set out the processes and milestones for re-trunking, and he said that he had been exploring the relevant legislation. He advised that, while the decision rests with the Minister, the assessment would be completed by officers from the Department for Transport (DfT) and it was important to present a strong and robust case.

AS said that the working group had also looked at other related A127 schemes and concluded that there were still some issues with the A127 corridor that needed to be looked at in the shorter term, in parallel with the re-trunking.

### **Item 3: Actions from the last Task Force meeting (AS)**

AS reiterated that the A127 Working Group had been set up and had met for the first time.

AS said that a letter had been sent to the Secretary of State for Transport, signed by him as chair of the Working Group and KB.

He added that the project team had been looking at potential future options for the A127 corridor once the road was re-trunked.

AS thanked NS for raising an important matter about a developer being willing to help fund potential future A127 improvements and advised that a separate meeting had been set up with Castle Point Borough Council.

KB said the A127 was not just a road but an important economic corridor and re-iterated the importance of the project to South Essex and the need to present the case for re-trunking as quickly as possible. He added that he would take ultimate responsibility for the project and was happy to have any difficult conversations with ministers but was keen for local members to be heavily involved and to lead the project.

NS thanked AS for his role in helping set up a separate meeting to discuss the potential A127 funding opportunity and reiterated the importance of the A127 to future growth and prosperity.

KB agreed and referred to the example of London Southend Airport, which he said he hoped would grow in the future but suggested that growth was being hampered because it was effectively located at the end of a cul-de-sac.

#### **Item 4: Project updates**

##### **Re-trunking (MR)**

MR said that re-trunking the A127 had been raised at a regular meeting with Highways England last week and that a representative from the DfT had also attended. He gave an overview of the meeting and stated that Essex County Council had a good relationship with the DfT and had secured other schemes in the Road Investment Strategy, such as the A120, M11 junction 7A and the A12.

MR stated that there were some concerns from the DfT about the re-trunking proposals which he wanted to flag to the Task Force. Firstly, he stated that DfT had reiterated the point that if the A127 did return to the Strategic Road Network then it would be competing with other schemes from across the country for funding for future improvements. MR said that the DfT had, therefore, suggested that Major Road Network funding might be more realistic in enabling more immediate improvements.

MR said that the DfT had emphasised the need for a single voice for the A127 and that, for example, it was important to decide whether the Task Force wants more or fewer junctions. He added that the DfT had said there might be an opportunity to pursue funding to develop the case for re-trunking.

KB suggested that there was a situation where colleagues from the district and borough councils in South Essex were struggling to get their Local Plans actioned because of high Government housing targets and said that infrastructure must come first. He believed that there was a need for a more joined up approach between the DfT and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in terms of transport infrastructure and housing. He said the focus for improving infrastructure should be on building for prosperity and jobs, not just housing.

MR stated that the DfT had advised they were already reviewing the Strategic Road Network (SRN) and that there was an opportunity to influence that process. He added that the DfT acknowledged there were large areas, such as Southend and Basildon, as well as places of strategic importance, such as the airport, which were not currently served by the SRN. The department were also looking at the A13 and, ultimately, which was the right route for strategic traffic.

MR reiterated that a letter had now been shared with officers from DfT and Highways England and sent to the Secretary of State for Transport. He advised that the immediate next steps were now to develop a lobbying plan, which would be influenced by the reply from the Minister, and arrange a meeting with the Secretary of State or Roads Minister. MR also noted there could be a case to lobby for potential development funding.

KB said he was pleased there had been initial discussions with the DfT and emphasised the importance that a strong case was now developed.

CH stated that he assumed the single voice for the re-trunking would be Essex County Council, as the highways authority, but supported by borough and district councils and the business community. He also asked whether a business case or dossier of evidence was going to be compiled and if the project team were going to start to gather supporting information from partners.

KB advised that Essex County Council would lead on compiling the case, based on its highways expertise, but acknowledged the important role district and borough councils would have in providing value input regarding economic development and housing. He said the work would be badged as the A127 Task Force and emphasised that it was a joint effort with no one partner more

important than the other. He added that there would be a dossier of evidence to put in front of ministers and set out the case.

MS asked whether the proposed Lower Thames Crossing had been taken into account during discussion with the DfT. MR advised that it had.

KB added that the sequencing of forthcoming projects such as the Lower Thames Crossing, Fairglen, A12 and A120 would also be important. He welcomed the significant investment in the county's infrastructure but said there was a need to ensure construction works were carefully planned to minimise disruption.

KB added that Essex County Council has been making the case for the proposed new A120 and the A12 upgrade to happen in tandem and that the same argument should be made for the Lower Thames Crossing and re-trunking the A127.

### **Re-trunking – communications and engagement (GB)**

GB explained that, from a communications and engagement perspective, the letter sent to the Secretary of State was a key milestone and that the response back and any further dialogue with the DfT about the process and timescales for re-trunking would help shape the lobbying campaign that was being developed.

GB stated that there was an intention to follow up the letter to the Secretary of State with a letter of support from local MPs.

GB explained that, although the campaign would be informed by further discussions, the intention was to follow a similar approach to the one taken for the A120 and that some likely communications and engagement activity had been discussed. This included developing a full communications and engagement plan, regular updates to the project webpage at key milestones and the development of key message briefings for partners to ensure a consistent narrative and that advocates were speaking with one voice and a clear, repeated message.

GB said a business board would also be established to unite and harness support for re-trunking from the business community and that there would be regular correspondence with Transport East the DfT, Highways England, MPs and Ministers. He added that communications methods, such as press releases, social media and newsletters, would be used to build support from the public and keep the story in the news.

GB stated the project team would seek to have the issue raised in Parliament and would support local MPs in drafting and raising parliamentary questions. He also suggested a survey to demonstrated support from the public and/or businesses could be carried out to add extra weight to the campaign.

GB suggested that, depending on circumstances, a parliamentary reception could be organised to formally present the case for re-trunking the A127.

KB suggested that even simple campaign materials such as lapel badges and banners would all contribute to giving the campaign visibility. He added that the campaign needed to raise the issue as loudly and as consistently as possible.

RW recommended that the Opportunity South Essex board could be used to engage businesses rather than setting up a separate business board. He also suggested that the case and related communications needed to focus on the risks of not re-trunking the A127, as well as the benefits,

citing the examples of businesses potentially relocating and increased unemployment. He added that building homes without investment in infrastructure to support people into jobs and help businesses to develop and grow would be a real problem.

KB thanked RW for his suggestions and said that the issue with the A120 campaign, upon which the A127 one has so far been based, was that there was not already a group such as Opportunity South Essex. He explained how businesses had been taken to meet the Roads Minister as part of the A120 project so that they could explain the issues they were facing themselves and that having that message come directly from businesses was an important tipping point.

**Action – KB suggested a representative from Opportunity South Essex was invited to join the A127 Working Group**

CH said that the outline communications and engagement plan looked comprehensive and asked whether the project team would also look to engage with Kate Willard from the Thames Estuary Envoy, whom he felt would be a champion for the project. He added that involving large local employers and businesses would be very powerful and more difficult for Government to rebuff.

KB agreed and said that the plan was to refine and enhance the model used for the A120 campaign. He reiterated that Kate Willard would be a very useful advocate and remarked that he was due to meet with her shortly.

CH stated that the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) had invited Kate Willard to its next board meeting and that the A127 project team were welcome to join too.

AS reminded the Task Force that the team were still awaiting clarity from the DfT on the process for re-trunking and that, once there was a clearer idea of what was required, a more definitive plan would be developed and, at that stage, it would be more appropriate to bring partners on board. He emphasised the need to have a clearer understanding of the current status of the project and the steps that must be followed so that the team could articulate that and demonstrate progress to partners.

AS added that the importance of MPs should not be understated and that they would have a key role in not only raising the issue in parliament, but also in strategically lobbying Ministers and helping to overcome any potential stumbling blocks with the DfT.

He added that caution was needed in relating Local Plans and the work of the A127 Task Force. He suggested infrastructure improvements that the Task Force was seeking were not to legitimise and enable housing.

MB reiterated the point about the link between Local Plans and re-trunking the A127. He stated that infrastructure must come first, then employment and then homes and suggested that the Government had to take responsibility for the problem of transport infrastructure issues preventing development.

He added that he would like the project webpage to be very public-friendly and that it would be important to take residents on the journey as the project develops.

**Action – KB agreed that the webpage was important and requested that it was reviewed**

GB advised that initial changes to the webpage had already been considered and would be progressed as quickly as possible.

GL introduced himself and explained that he had worked with KB on the A120 campaign and the intention was to mirror that approach for the A127. He referred to earlier comments from CH about the need for one voice and stated that was also the key point being made by the DfT - the need for a consistent message. He reiterated that a key message briefing would be developed so that everyone had a script and narrative that they knew and could refer to when talking about the A127.

NS said that he sat on the Opportunity South Essex board and that South Essex was often criticised for poor productivity. He suggested that was partly due to the impact of congestion and delays on people and goods, and that productivity should form part of the case for re-trunking the A127. KB agreed.

MS suggested that the case should also consider environmental issues along the corridor.

KB agreed and stated that when the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) had suggested potentially implementing a charging clean air zone in Basildon that he had invited them to do so themselves and take the criticism for it. He suggested air quality issues caused by congestion were the result of failing to invest in road infrastructure before building housing.

KB suggested that he would like to see a rapid transit system introduced in South Essex to complement the A127 and remove the need for people to travel by car.

In response to a question from CH, KB and GL advised the role of Jacobs in delivering the communications campaign, explaining the team was embedded in Essex Highways and the delivery was effectively 'in house'. KB noted this approach had and was working extremely well on other Essex Highways projects. CH advised that he had a communications role with ASELA and would be happy to facilitate joint messages as appropriate.

### **Fairglen (TR)**

TR provided an update on interfacing projects that were being developed in the interim. He explained that the Fairglen project was currently going through the tender assessment process and this would feed into the submission of the Final Business case for release of funding for the scheme.

TR said that the contract was due to be awarded by summer 2021 and that construction was expected to start soon after.

A flythrough video of the scheme was shown to the Task Force.

KB stated that the video was a good demonstration of what was planned at the Fairglen Interchange and that the scheme would deliver a considerable improvement on the current junction.

MS questioned what provision was being made for cyclists to the north of the junction.

CS said that the focus of attention in recent times had been on improving cycling on the southern side of the junction and that two-way facilities were available on that side.

MS suggested it was important that the northern side was still well used by cyclists and that facilities needed to also be looked at on that side of the junction.

**Action – Officers to report back to MS on cycling improvements as part of the Fairglen scheme**

### **A127 Major Road Network junction schemes (TR)**

TR explained that shorter-term improvements to the A127 were being developed with four junction improvement schemes which were currently in the design development stage. He reminded the Task Force that the junction schemes were submitted as pre-Strategic Outline Business Case bids, for approval to proceed to the next stage of development for Major Road Network funding, which was to develop a Strategic Outline Business Case.

TR stated that it was announced by Government in the Spring budget that the schemes had been approved to proceed to the next stage and that the team was now looking to develop a robust evidence base for the schemes. He said that base and reference models had been developed to assess the benefits of the different options at the junctions once they had been identified. He added that the Warley, Halfway House and Fortune of War junctions were being treated as one project and that workshops were coming up to look at problems and objectives for the junctions, which would then be used to identify options. TR explained that a long list of options, which could range from five per junction to more than 100, would then be formed and assessed against set criteria to create a shortlist of options.

TR said that the Pound Lane scheme had been subject to separate discussions with DfT and was, therefore, slightly behind the other three schemes.

#### **Item 5: Project timeline (TR)**

TR explained that an overarching project timeline had been put together to give people an understanding of the timings involved across the three A127 projects (re-trunking, MRN junction improvements and Fairglen) and to help manage expectations.

TR reiterated that the tender assessment for Fairglen would be completed this winter, with the construction contract awarded in summer 2021 and construction starting in autumn 2021.

TR said that a Strategic Outline Business Case for the MRN junction improvement schemes would be submitted in early 2021, with public consultation and engagement then taking place before an Outline Business Case was submitted in autumn 2021. He emphasised that all dates were indicative and could be difficult to predict because of planning milestones and potential issues, such as complex utility services. He added that timelines would be updated as the projects progressed.

TR stated that the programme for re-trunking was still being developed and would be determined by the responses received by the DfT.

**Action – KB requested that re-trunking was moved to the top of the timeline for the three projects**

#### **Item 6: Any other business and future items**

MS requested that an item be discussed at a future meeting about the need for investment in rail infrastructure in South Essex and what it means for the A127.

**Action - KB suggested an item about rail infrastructure could be taken to a future Working Group meeting**

RW questioned whether there was a risk that future investment in the A127 would be impacted by the funding for Fairglen and potentially the MRN junction improvements.

KB suggested he did not believe it was a case of either/or.

KB commented there was a need for local MPs to be really engaged about re-trunking the A127. He thanked officers and councillors for their efforts.

**Action – KB asked that a timetable of future meetings was agreed and that Task Force meetings follow on from Working Group meetings**

KB thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting