

Fourth meeting of the A127 Economic Growth Corridor Task Force

Date: Friday 6 March 2020

Minutes prepared by: Gareth Burton

Location: Tickfield Centre, Tickfield Avenue, Southend-on-Sea SS2 6LL

Participants

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

Cllr Mike Steptoe (MS) – Leader of Rochford District Council

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

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

Neil Hoskins (NH) – Interim Group Manager, Major Projects and Strategic Transport Policy, Southend Council

Bill Newman (BN) – Planning Consultant, Brentwood Borough Council

Emma Clay (EC) – Havering Council

Peter Geraghty (PG) – Director of Planning and Transport, Southend Borough Council

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

Sean Perry (SP) – Divisional Director, Jacobs

Cliff Malone (CM) – Essex Framework Director, Jacobs

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

Cllr Maria Pearson (MP) – Brentwood Borough Council

Paul Harwood (PH) – Highways England

Cllr Ron Woodley (RW) – Southend Borough Council

Mat Kiely (MK) - Strategic Lead Transport Development, Thurrock Council

Shaun Scrutton (SS) – Managing Director, Rochford District Council

Ian Butt (IB) – Head of Place and Policy, Castle Point Borough Council

Tomasz Kozlowski (TK) – Assistant Director – Growth, Basildon Borough Council

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

Charles Sweeny (CS) – Development Team Manager, Basildon Borough Council

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

Item 1: Introduction by Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chair.

KB welcomed the attendees and praised the venue for the meeting. He thanked previous chair MS for his excellent work and explained that he was taking over as the movement of the task force has changed slightly, and in light of ongoing conversations with Defra and the DfT. KB described the A127 as hugely important to the economy and stressed the need to get it moved up the government's agenda.

Item 2: Opening remarks

Following introductions, KB stated it was critically important to persuade the government to bring this key economic corridor back into the strategic road network. He suggested that Essex County Council (ECC) would have insufficient money to fund the improvements the A127 corridor really requires, particularly given the significant growth plans in south Essex. KB reiterated that he saw getting the A127 re-trunked as the principle role of the task force and said that pace was important (i.e. months and not years). He said he plans to meet with the Transport Secretary as soon as possible to make the case for trunking the route.

KB suggested that there was a disconnect between Defra and the DfT, citing the example of the air quality work in Basildon, and emphasised the need for the government to be more joined up.

KB referenced a successful meeting with the Environment Minister, involving the south Essex MPs, ECC and Basildon Borough Council (BBC), during which potential alternative measures to a charging clean air zone (CAZ) were discussed. He said he would do whatever he can to avoid a Charging Clean Air Zone (CAZ).

Item 3: Re-trunking process (MR)

MR advised that there are various ways of accessing funding for transport infrastructure projects and that getting the A127 into the strategic road network would enable access to a national funding stream.

MR referenced the planned growth in south Essex and the importance of investment in sustainable modes to help take local trips off the road network.

MR stated that there are a number of routes in south Essex that could be trunked, including the A13 and A130, and that the Southend area is one of the largest areas in the UK without access to the strategic road network.

KB asked PH for his views on the prospect of the A127 being re-trunked. PH urged the task force to be cautious and advised that although Highways England has significant funding stream (Roads Investment Strategy), it is spread quite thinly. He added that there will almost inevitably be communities that are disappointed by the Roads Investment Strategy and stressed the need to be realistic. PH remarked that having the A127 re-trunked did not mean it would automatically have money thrown at it, however it would mean that maintenance liability would transfer to Highways England.

KB stressed that the A127 is not a road and is in fact an economic corridor serving south Essex. He said that the government must understand that south Essex could not achieve its growth potential without significant investment in transport infrastructure.

TK agreed and said that growth was the key. He referenced ongoing work involving the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) relating to both this corridor and the coastal corridor. TK

emphasised the huge scale of the growth plans in south Essex and the planned Lower Thames Crossing to reiterate the need for a joined-up approach across south Essex.

KB again stated the importance that the government is also needs to be joined up and the need to treat the A127 as an economic corridor rather than just a road.

Item 4: Update on interfacing projects (MR)

MR provided an update on the A127 speed limit reduction and said there had also been a successful meeting with the Environment Minister about potential alternatives to a charging CAZ in Basildon.

KB reiterated that he would not impose a charging CAZ unless formally directed to do so by government.

MR explained that any alternatives must deliver compliance with air quality levels in the shortest possible time, and that the difficulty was in providing robust evidence that they would achieve that. He said that ECC and BBC were engaging with businesses in the Basildon area to find out more about the make-up of their vehicle fleets.

KB asked what happened to funds collected from charging CAZs.

Action – MR to check what happens to monies collected from charging clean air zones

MR emphasised that individuals can also help improve air quality by changing the way they travel and switching to more sustainable forms of transport.

KB remarked that he is regularly contacted by people concerning congestion, forgetting that they are part of the cause for the traffic. He made comparisons between the challenge of getting people to recycle 20 years ago and the challenge now facing us in getting people to travel more sustainably.

NS suggested the main issue on the A127 itself that is causing air quality problems is the Fortune of War junction and that it would be resolved by straightening the junction.

MR explained that an expression of interest had been made for the Main Road Network (MRN) funding to improve the Fortune of War junction, along with other potential junction improvements on the A127. MR outlined some of the potential challenges with the Fortune of War scheme, included the need to maintain a service road to the south and complex utility connections which would have to be relocated.

Action – KB asked that the feasibility study for the Fortune of War junction was circulated to the task force but marked as confidential

KB reassured the task force that the council has a plan for the junction.

MS asked whether the utility connections involved one supplier or numerous. MR responded to say that a number are involved, including a large BT chamber under the ground, which following any improvements would need to continue to be accessed.

Action – KB requested that MR talks through the feasibility study at a future meeting

MR said that the proposed Fairglen scheme was expected to get planning permission shortly and the tender process would begin very soon.

MS asked how long the project would take to be completed and KB advised it would take about 18 months once works begin. He added that the scheme would bring significant relief to the area. He

stressed the need to carefully plan and factor in various upcoming schemes in Essex to minimise disruption during construction, including works on the Lower Thames Crossing (LTC), M11, A12, A130 (Chelmsford North East Bypass) and potentially the A120.

NS warned of the need to be mindful about what is coming and reiterated the importance of being joined up. He suggested that half of traffic wouldn't want to head towards the M25 once the LTC is built, which means Fairglen is hugely important.

KB asked if anyone had updates on the timescales for the LTC project.

MK advised that a supplementary consultation was running until the end of the month (March).

Strategic context – IB

IB outlined the work ASELA is doing and explained that it has set itself the task of establishing what transformational changes are needed across south Essex to unlock the growth it has to accommodate by 2050.

He stressed the scale of growth - 95,000 new homes by 2040 and 147,000 by 2050, as well as 150,000 new jobs (based on standard growth projections).

He outlined issues including transport infrastructure and traffic congestion, as well as skills and economic productivity.

IB said that south Essex costs the Treasury more to run than it generates in tax receipts, and that needed to be redressed. He said that the infrastructure and the way people move around in south Essex had to change as part of that.

IB said an issues and options report was ready to be published after the local elections in May and that there would be public engagement, with a particular focus on engaging young people.

IB outlined the various ASELA workstreams, including growth, productivity and connectivity and that these are focussing on two key corridors; the central growth corridor and the coastal growth corridor.

He remarked that large numbers of people in south Essex are commuting to Basildon for work and that it can take an hour and 20 minutes by bus and there are no direct links. He said that how and why people move around South Essex was a major focus, with the majority of trips south/west.

MS asked about north/south travel and IB commented that queuing on the A130 towards Chelmsford was getting worse. KB advised it would get better with the implementation of the Fairglen scheme.

KB said he was very encouraged by the ASELA work and that it appeared to complement the work of the A127 task force. He said that people will not get out of their cars and travel differently until there is a more reliable and cheaper alternative. He stated that improvements to sustainable modes was the answer and he was not in the business of building more roads. KB said his vision was that people would be able to get from their homes to a rapid transit system without even considering getting in their cars.

TK said that it had taken three hours to get from Great Leighs to Basildon and that connectivity in some places in Essex was very poor.

IB advised that ASELA was setting up local investment funds to complement any government funding available. He added that south Essex has a huge growth agenda and is playing catch up.

He said that south Essex had an additional challenge in that it has three local transport authorities and stressed the need for a joined-up approach.

IB said that the first ASELA meeting about the coastal corridor was taking place w/c 9th March and would be chaired by Thurrock Council's chief executive.

He said the central growth corridor work was more relevant to the A127 task force and that the A127 is taken as the central line of that corridor with activity being focussed within a range of four miles (north or south) of the road. He again stressed the importance of young people and efforts to maintain attracting young people in the area, including looking at universities.

IB said ASELA was approaching Ford and other businesses to support and be part of its work as well.

He assured the task force that there was nothing that ASELA was doing which stops or contradicts any of the A127 task force's work.

IB stated that the long-term infrastructure solutions for the area needed to be linked to the planned growth and what is required to unlock it.

He said ASELA had set itself a timescale of three or four months for its work.

KB re-emphasised his desire to meet with the minister and IB again stressed the need to join up the approach. KB agreed and said it was critically important that everyone is putting forward the same message. He again stated that he did not think the local authorities would get the funding required without the A127 being trunked.

KB thanked IB for his presentation and said he was very impressed with the focus on sustainable transport and engaging younger people.

Transport appraisal update - SP

SP provided a transport appraisal update and outlined how things have developed since the last task force meeting, including sifting options based on the agreed objectives. He said the task force objectives were consistent with ASELA's objectives and ongoing work.

SP outlined the various stages of the transport appraisal process and explained they were at stage 5 (generating options) at the last task force and had now moved to stage 7 developing and assessing potential options.

He reminded the task force of the project objectives – Environment, Connectivity, Economic Growth, Safety and Resilience, and Asset Management, as these are important in the initial assessment of any potential options.

SP explained that there was initially a long list of options made up of 34 options from previous studies and a further 258 from engagement workshops and other work. He explained that the options included passenger transport, technology and active mode improvements, as well as highway improvements.

KB said he was keen to ensure existing businesses and businesses interested in potentially moving into the area were engaged to see what improvements they would like to see made.

KB gave the example of Harlow and how transport infrastructure improvements (A414, M11) had been important in attracting businesses to the area, particularly in and around the Enterprise Zones. He suggested something similar was required in south Essex.

IB re-emphasised the importance of skills.

SP explained that options had been assessed and refined down to 99 options and they had been split into minor highway, major highway and integrated transport categories over short, medium and long term.

SP outlined some of the minor highways options, including junction improvements at the Fortune of War, Warley and Halfway House and that these were already subject of a process with funding bodies such as the Department for Transport. He also mentioned potential new junctions, including Pound Lane to support Basildon Council's Local Plan.

SP went on to outline the major highways improvements options to consolidate strategic movements along the route, including potential new links or widening of the A127.

KB questioned whether the district's/borough's Local Plans heavily referenced the A127 and was assured by TK and IB that they do.

SS questioned whether the major highways options were all new roads and SP said they were and that the team had to look at all possible options as part of the transport appraisal process in order to present a robust assessment process to the DfT.

KB said he did not think the council would be able to build more roads.

NS expressed concerns about making the A127 a motorway-like road that is harder to get on and off due to clogging up local roads.

KB agreed and said there needed to be a focus on making modal shift easier.

SP outlined the integrated transport options, including passenger transport, active travel (walking and cycling), new modes and technology enablers. He said the options would require large investment but also significant behaviour change.

KB reiterated that people will not change their behaviours until there are cheaper and more reliable alternatives.

IB questioned whether free bus passes could be introduced for under 30s.

SS also stated the importance of walking and cycling, and that people don't need to be fit, healthy and lycra-wearing to travel in those ways any more. He specifically referenced electric bikes.

SP mentioned work to try and tackle severance issues, so that people can cross roads easily and safely.

KB said he had an ambition that ECC becomes a proper transport authority like Transport for London. He also said he would like to see Oyster Cards extended further into Essex.

MK said there had been a recent consultation on extending contactless payments, but he had not heard any more.

SP said that there was a collective need to better integrate transport services.

SP referenced some of the potential integrated transport options, including a rapid transit system, park and ride, increased train service capacity, reprioritisation of road space, and potentially trams/light rail.

SP said the options could be packaged up to include a combination across the various categories, and that potential packages are being reviewed. He outlined various scenarios and how they could perform now, in 2034 and in 2050.

SP explained some of the potential funding options for transport infrastructure improvements on the A127 growth corridor, including various central government sources, local authority funding and private financing. He added that if the A127 was re-trunked then more funding could be available for the sustainable transport measures, for instance.

Communications and engagement update – GB

GB updated the task force on related communications and engagement activity since the last meeting. He referred to public engagement in summer 2019, which had a Future of Transport theme and asked people what they thought transport would look like in 2050. He explained that a series of five workshops took place in south Essex libraries where children were encouraged to share what they thought future transport would look like while their parents/guardians completed a survey about their transport usage, views on the A127 corridor and potential future improvements.

GB outlined key findings from the survey, including almost three quarters of people identifying private vehicles as their main form of transport, cost and journey times being the main barriers to other forms of transport and congestion/slow journey times/congestion the primary issues people experienced.

GB explained that project updates had been given to the Basildon Business Group and Rochford District Business Breakfast. He said that a transport user group meeting had been held in November 2019, with attendees including representatives from London Southend Airport, Arriva, Port of Tilbury, Road Haulage Association, Safer Essex Roads Partnership, Essex Ramblers and East of England Ambulance Service. The session included an update on the background to the project, objectives, key movements identified and next steps, as well as an opportunity for them to share their own thoughts and experiences of the A127 corridor.

GB said an item had also been included on the agenda for a Confederation of Passenger Transport meeting with bus operators in December 2019.

GB outlined the communications ahead of the start of the new 50mph on a stretch of the A127 for air quality and road safety improvements, including a briefing note for partners, social media updates, e-newsletters, a press release and other updates. He also mentioned a leaflet prepared for display at south Essex speed awareness course venues and libraries.

GB said a survey of Basildon businesses was due to be launched imminently to help compile the robust evidence needed to demonstrate the potential effectiveness of alternative measures to a charging clean air zone in Basildon.

Action - KB suggested a big communications campaign was required for the A127 growth corridor, linked in with the work of ASELA and the south Essex district/borough councils

KB added that local authorities have a habit of doing things in isolation and it was important to be joined up with this. He also stressed the importance of engaging with the public and, in particular, young people. He said the campaign needed to help the government see that the A127 is not a local road in Essex but a critical growth corridor for the regional economy.

RW said that if something isn't done to improve the corridor then what south Essex already has to offer will be stifled. He said infrastructure improvements were needed now to enable growth.

Programme update - SP

SP updated the task force on the programme for the project and upcoming milestones, including finalising an appraisal report that will then lead into an outline business case.

AOB and further items for discussion

KB said he was keen to increase the frequency of the task force meetings. He recapped on the actions from the meeting, including sharing the feasibility study for the Fortune of War and giving a presentation on it.

He reiterated his desire for the focus to be on sustainable transport and emphasised that the council cannot keep building roads.

KB thanked everyone for attending and the meeting was closed.