

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

Date: Friday 12 March 2021

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 (also Chair of the A127 Task Force)

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

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

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

Cllr Ian Ward (IW) – Rochford District Councillor

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

Cllr Jack Ferguson (JF) – Basildon Borough Councillor

James Duddridge MP (JDu) – MP for Rochford and Southend East

Joseph Demetriou (JDe) – Office of Alex Burghart MP

Jack Warren (JW) – Office of James Duddridge MP (MP for Rochford and Southend East)

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

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

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

Alastair Southgate (ASo) – Transport Strategy Lead, Essex County Council

Amie Lucas (AL) – Cabinet Assistant, 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

### **Item 1: Welcome by Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chair of the A127 Task Force**

KB welcomed everyone to the meeting and re-emphasised the importance of the A127 corridor to south Essex, the wider region and the rest of the UK, particularly in light of the Chancellor's recent Freeport announcement and the planned Lower Thames Crossing. He stressed that pace was very important and there was a need to progress the re-trunking project as quickly as possible.

### **Item 2: Working group update**

ASh told the Task Force that the A127 working group had met again on 11 February 2021 and had been updated on correspondence with the Roads Minister.

GB added that the working group had been advised that a meeting had been requested with the DfT and Highways England and had since taken place. Further details from the joint DfT/HE meeting would be covered in more detail later in the Task Force meeting. He said that work had been started to revisit the A127 asset registers and compile other evidence that would be needed to support the case for re-trunking, and that a revised overarching timeline for all A127 projects had been shared. GB also stated that the working group were keen for a joint letter to be sent from all South Essex MPs championing the case for re-trunking the A127, when appropriate.

ASh said he was pleased that a revised timeline had been produced and it would be important in helping ensure MPs and councillors knew the status of the projects and the next steps.

MS asked for clarity about the extent of the A127 intended to be re-trunked and MR advised that all options were open. JDu requested immediate clarification and said that the trunking needed to extend to Victoria Circus in Southend. He said it would weaken the case if it did not and would not carry the support of South Essex MPs. KB agreed.

MR said that it could be the whole length of the A127, and that detail of the trunking was all up for discussion.

IW said that there were potential large developments between Southend and Rochford and that the A127 was going to be key to those.

CS said that the project team was happy to be completely guided by the task force about where the trunking should start and finish, and that it had been good to get absolute clarity on the Task Force's position.

KB reiterated the need for the project to progress quickly and requested that lobbying continued in parallel with the ongoing discussions with the DfT and Highways England, notably with a letter from MPs. He stated that political pressure was important and would help influence trunking decisions. **Action – Letter from South Essex MPs to be drafted.**

### Item 3: Re-trunking update

MR advised that the project team had met with the DfT and Highways England on 1 March 2021 and that, as a result of the lobbying of the Task Force and letter to the Roads Minister, both organisations were very aware of the collective desire for the A127 to be re-trunked. He said that the DfT had emphasised a preference for roads to be managed at the appropriate level, with local roads managed locally and strategic roads managed by Highways England as part of the Strategic Road Network.

MR said that the DfT had indicated the Road Investment Strategy (RIS) 2 period (April 2020 to March 2025) was when the extents of the Strategic Road Network would be reviewed (identifying candidates for both trunking and de-trunking) and the timing of discussions about the A127 were ideal. He added the DfT would be looking to make recommendations about trunking by April 2022 and to then sign a memorandum of understanding with local authorities, with a handover of assets

from the start of RIS 3 (April 2025). MR said that the A127, A13 and A130 were all under potential consideration for trunking.

JDu mentioned Mark Francois MP had recently met with the DfT at Downing Street. He said that timelines for re-trunking the A127 needed shortening and that pressure needed to be put on the DfT.

KB advised that he wanted a strong evidence base and case for re-trunking to be compiled and said that proposed growth in South Essex was not going to be realised without the A127 being re-trunked.

CS said that a letter from MPs could be drafted and that the support of JDu would be very helpful.

CS recognised that the defined re-trunking process with Highways and the DfT was lengthy, but that lobbying could continue separately, focused on the strategic importance of the A127, housing, economic growth, the levelling up agenda and the freeport and airport.

KB emphasised the need for the matter to be raised at every opportunity for the Government to recognise the A127 as a main economic corridor for the whole region.

MB stated that while he recognised the focus on the A127, the A130 also had an important role to play in linking the freeport and airport with the A12 and East Anglia.

GL re-emphasised the impact the Task Force had had and that the DfT had acknowledged the lobbying to date had put re-trunking of the A127 firmly on their radar.

KB questioned whether a meeting should be requested with the Roads Minister.

JDu advised that it would be important to present a case that had the backing of all local councils and MPs.

IW suggested that the Government's own ambitious growth agenda should mean it was supportive of the Task Force's re-trunking ambitions.

MR said Transport East had attended the recent meeting with the DfT and Highways England and had confirmed the A127 corridor had been identified as one of its six priority areas. He added it had also advised the DfT about Major Road Network (MRN) schemes in the region.

ASo said Transport East had also met the DfT more recently about MRN projects and that had also led to a discussion about re-trunking the A127.

MR said the DfT had warned that pursuing trunking simply to access funds was not the right approach and any decision would be based on the best fit for the Strategic Road Network. He added a consistent view was needed from the Task Force and that re-trunking might mean closing some of the accesses to the A127, for example.

MR said the DfT had also advised that even if the A127 was not re-trunked there could be other opportunities for funding, with the funding cap for the MRN potentially being increased (*Note: the DfT has since stated there is no cap on MRN funding*).

MR said Highways England had provided an overview of the re-trunking process and a list of 21 de-trunking and trunking candidates was being assessed during RIS 2, including the A127. He said Highways England was also working with the Lower Thames Crossing project team to understand its potential impacts.

MR provided an overview of the likely next steps and advised another more detailed meeting with Highways England and the DfT was scheduled for next month. He advised the case for re-trunking needed to focus on the strategic function of the A127. He said that included the fact Southend and Basildon were among the largest areas not connected by the Strategic Road Network, as well as the location of the ports and London Southend Airport.

MR said any reference to growth should focus on the South East region rather than particular sites.

IW asked whether the Lower Thames Crossing proposals were now finalised and whether wider connectivity was being looked at.

CS advised that the project director had made it clear the Lower Thames Crossing was more than just a major highways scheme and was looking at links with the A12, A130 and A127.

A draft timeline outlining the anticipated milestones for Highways England's trunking process was shared with the Task Force. MR explained Highways England would be looking to make recommendations by April 2022 with a view to a handover in April 2025 (start of RIS 3).

In response to earlier discussion about the Lower Thames Crossing, CH said the DCO application for the project had been withdrawn but was expected to be resubmitted. He added Brentwood Borough Council had been in dialogue with Highways England about its local development process and wanted to ensure conversations were being linked.

**Action - CS said he would contact Highways England to ensure all discussions were joined up.**

**Action - KB requested a representative from Highways England attend the next task force meeting.**

TR shared an updated overarching timeline of A127 projects and explained a further line would be added to outline planned lobbying activities. He said key milestones had been identified for re-trunking the A127, with a decision from HE/DfT and Memorandum of Understanding expected in March 2022, culminating in statutory orders and a handover of the A127 in 2025.

TR said construction of a scheme at the Fairglens Interchange was still aiming to start later this year. He explained two packages of junction improvements were being explored as part of Major

Road Network bids and a strategic outline business case was expected to be submitted in late spring.

#### **Item 4: Any other business**

MS asked for further clarity on a question he had raised previously about proposed cycling provision at the Fairglen Interchange and KB asked that an answer was provided as soon as possible. CS stated his determination to help ensure cycling provision. **Action – Response to be provided to MS about cycling provision at Fairglen Interchange.**

**Action - KB advised there was a positive story to tell about both minor and major improvements to the A127 and requested that a press release was drafted.**

GL said the recent freeport announcement could provide an additional angle.

MS observed that by reducing pressure on the A127 there would also be a positive knock-on effect on local roads, citing, as an example, the impact incidents on the A127 can have on Rayleigh.

CH agreed there was a positive story to tell and that communicating the proposals would gain the attention of Highways England and help build momentum.

**Action - KB requested a campaign timeline was produced.**

IW agreed with MS and said that further demonstrated why the A127 needed to be trunked right through to Southend.

**Action - CS said discussions would be held with Southend Borough Council to seek agreement on where the trunk road should end.**

**Action - KB suggested the next task force meeting should be held after the local elections in May but that a campaign timeline could be shared by email earlier.** He thanked everyone for attending and the meeting was closed.