

A127 Corridor Engagement Group - Meeting Notes

Project:	A127 Economic Growth Corridor		
Meeting title:	A127 Engagement Group meeting		
Date:	23/11/23	Location:	Microsoft Teams virtual meeting
Attendees	Cllr Tom Cunningham (ECC)	TC	
	Cllr Malcolm Buckley (ECC)	MB	
	Cllr Laureen Shaw (ECC)	LS	
	Cllr Mike Steptoe (ECC)	MS	
	Cllr Andrew Sheldon (ECC)	AS	
	Cllr Richard Moore (Basildon Council)	RM	
	Cllr Barry Aspinall (Brentwood Borough Council)	BA	
	George Coxshall (on behalf of James Duddridge MP)	GC	
	Billy Parr	BP	
	Mark Robinson	MR	
	Alan Lindsay	AL	
	Sean Perry	SP	
	Chris Shipway	CS	
	Gareth Burton	GB	
	Peter Franklin	PF	

Agenda Item	Item
1.	<p>Welcome and introductions</p> <p>TC welcomed everyone to the meeting and apologised for the long time since the previous meeting. He introduced himself as the new cabinet member for Highways, Infrastructure and Sustainable Transport and invited attendees to introduce themselves individually.</p> <p>BP set the scene for the meeting and, like TC, acknowledged that it had been some time since the last meeting and explained there had been some good progress made across various A127 workstreams over the last year or so.</p> <p>BP explained it was a challenging time to develop and deliver large infrastructure projects. He summarised the updates which would be given during the meeting, including the latest A127 MRN proposals, discussions with the</p>

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	Department for Transport and National Highways regarding retrunking of the A127 and progress with the Fairglen Interchange scheme.
2.	<p>Overview</p> <p>SP outlined the proposed structure, roles and membership of the various A127 groups moving forward, explaining that the previous A127 Task Force would be replaced by an A127 Engagement Group (this meeting) and would consist of Members and MPs, but would also later be opened up to business groups.</p> <p>He set out how other groups would feed into the A127 Engagement Group, including an A127 Local Member Forum (previously the A127 Member Steering Group) and the A127 Officer Working Group.</p> <p>SP also explained how other external organisations and groups, including Transport East, the National Highways/Essex County Council Strategic Collaboration Board, South Essex Councils (formerly ASELA) and Opportunity South Essex would act as feeder groups for the A127 groups and meetings.</p> <p>AS commented that the structuring of the groups looked very similar to the existing but with some name changes, and he was therefore happy with it. However, he asked that the Local Member Forum continued to play a role in monitoring timescales for projects and that the Officer Working Group fed into the Local Member Forum and not just straight up to the Engagement Group.</p> <p>TC agreed and said there was no intention to dilute the role of the Local Member Forum.</p> <p>Action: Officers agreed to amend the structure diagram to reflect that the Officer Working Group would feed into the Local Member Forum.</p> <p>Action: TC asked that the number of attendees for the various groups were updated. He added that there should be an opportunity to update all local members. TC also referenced parish and town councils and asked that consideration was given to how they were to be updated.</p> <p>LS reiterated the importance of engaging town and parish councils, as well as district, borough and city councils, and ensuring they were kept informed about the various A127 projects.</p> <p>GB explained that there had not previously been a formal group for engaging parish and town councils regarding the A127 projects, but he acknowledged the importance of doing so, particularly as schemes move into construction but also at other key milestones. He said they would be engaged either through a similar group or separate briefings.</p> <p>Action: TC said he would be happy for the parish and town councils to nominate a representative for the Local Member Forum meetings. He suggested contacting the parish/town clerks in the first instance.</p> <p>TC concluded that members were in agreement with the proposed structure of the groups, subject to the minor changes discussed. This was agreed.</p> <p><i>Post-meeting note: TC has asked AS to chair the Local Member Forum.</i></p>

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	<p>SP highlighted some of the key issues facing ECC and, in particular, South Essex and the A127 corridor. These included rethinking of the A127, getting partner buy-in to help strengthen the case for future Government investment in the corridor, the development and consideration of long-term options for the corridor, careful coordination of schemes and activities, and the financing strategy needed to fund the development and delivery of schemes.</p>
3.	<p>Policy context</p> <p>SP explained the changing local and national policy landscape, and how there was significant focus on reducing environmental impacts, tackling climate change and improving air quality.</p> <p>He added that the DfT also wanted to improve transport for the user, particularly in terms of building confidence in the network as we continue to recover from the pandemic. He outlined how there was a desire to improve the user experience of the network to ensure it is safe, reliable and inclusive. Finally, he explained there was also a focus from the DfT on growing and levelling up the economy.</p> <p>SP set out some of the key focuses on ECC's own Everyone's Essex strategy, which he explained were informing the four strategic themes in the emerging new Essex Local Transport Plan (LTP4). He subsequently set out the vision and three of the new strategic themes (Supporting People, Health, Wellbeing, and Independence, Creating Sustainable Places and Communities and Connecting People, Places and Businesses) in more detail.</p> <p>SP explained that there were also plans to create Future Transport Strategy for South Essex which would be developed alongside LTP4 and incorporate previous work on the A127 corridor and the aspirations of South Essex Councils (formerly ASELA). He said the strategy would include an implementation plan for South Essex and that a draft needed to be submitted to the DfT by Spring 2024.</p> <p>MS questioned the area the Future Transport Strategy would cover and whether north-south corridors were being considered as well as east-west. SP confirmed the strategy would cover the whole South Essex area, including the east-west A127 corridor, as well as the east-west A13 corridor, the rail network, the passenger transport network and north-south movements in South Essex.</p> <p>MS questioned whether north-south rail connectivity would be considered, giving Chelmsford to Southend as an example. SP confirmed those sorts of issues would be looked at as part of the strategy but not necessarily focusing on specific modes.</p> <p>MR made the point there had been meetings with officers from the district, borough, city and unitary councils in developing the Local Transport Plan.</p> <p>MS asked about the timeline for the strategy coming forward and MR advised the plan was for it to be completed by spring 2024 to inform the implementation plan required by the DfT.</p>

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<p>4.</p>	<p>A127 MRN project</p> <p>MR provided an update on the A127 MRN project, explaining that the initial bid for the scheme had been submitted in 2019 but that there had been changes to the proposals since that time. He said the scheme currently included widening of the A127 eastbound between Halfway House and Dunton, straightening of the Fortune of War junction and various active travel improvements. MR explained there was also a separate developer proposal to signalise the Halfway House junction as part of proposed mitigation for the Dunton Hills Garden Village.</p> <p>MR set out the objectives for the MRN scheme before he and PF talked through the latest design drawings for the scheme.</p> <p>MS questioned whether there would be north-south access through the Fortune of War junction and PF confirmed there was not at present and would not be as part of the scheme.</p> <p>MR provided an overview of the current programme for the MRN project and explained it was very tight, and subject to change, but the aim was to submit a strategic outline case to the DfT in early 2024, with a planning application to follow in September 2024 and an outline business case to be submitted in January 2025. He said that on the basis the scheme is approved by the DfT, construction was currently expected to start in spring 2026 and be completed in autumn 2028.</p> <p>BA questioned whether there were any proposals at Halfway House or further towards the junction with the M25, particularly given the proposed developments and planned Lower Thames Crossing. MR advised that there were not proposals as part of the MRN project but there were separate proposals as part of the mitigation or the Brentwood Enterprise Park and Dunton Hills Garden Village. He said those plans would be covered in more detail later in the meeting.</p> <p>BA questioned the logic of the A127 being two lanes when coming off the M25 and then widening to three lanes further from the junction with the M25. PF explained that the eastbound section between Halfway House and Dunton was forecast to be significantly over capacity in the future and that widening of a short section had been identified as achievable as part of this particular funding opportunity. He added that other areas were considered for similar interventions but were more challenging because of land issues and the scale of funding which would be required.</p> <p>BP said there would be expected to be an increase in traffic on the A128 from the Orsett Cock roundabout as a result of the Lower Thames Crossing which also partly explained the rationale for the A127 widening proposals.</p> <p>BA said he remained sceptical and was concerned about potential traffic congestion caused by going from three lanes to two lanes and then back to three lanes again.</p>

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	<p>BP said that would be monitored and that ECC was pushing for a thorough monitoring programme to help understand the impacts of the Lower Thames Crossing once it is open.</p> <p>BA and BP discussed the timescales for the Lower Thames Crossing project and BP clarified that the Development Consent Order decision was expected in June 2024.</p> <p>AS asked what communications was planned about the MRN scheme so that residents can be updated. TC agreed and suggested there was a need to communicate as much as possible as soon as possible.</p> <p>GB advised there would be communications to coincide with the submission of the strategic outline case for the project and then there was likely to be public consultation next year prior to submission of the planning application and outline business case.</p> <p>Action: AS asked for members to be heavily involved in any communications and said they could help amplify any communications using their own networks and community channels.</p> <p>MR outlined key risks to the MRN scheme and shared separate developer proposals as mitigation for the Brentwood Enterprise Park and Dunton Hills Garden Village.</p>
5.	<p>Retrunking</p> <p>SP explained that making the case for the A127 to be retrunked has previously been a key priority for the task force and a significant amount of data had been submitted to support the case. He explained that ECC had since met with the DfT in January 2023 and National Highways in July 2023 and been advised their current recommendation was instead trunking the A13 from Stanford-le-Hope to the Fairglen Interchange. He explained the recommendation would be fed into the Road Investment Strategy and the council was now awaiting the DfT to complete the decision phase of this process.</p> <p>MS asked for an update on the second phase of improvements at the Fairglen Interchange and again requested further clarification about cycling provision north of the junction and how a cyclist travelling along the A1245 would navigate the junction.</p> <p>Action: AL advised that an update on the Fairglen Interchange scheme would follow on the agenda but said he understood a response had been provided about the cycling connections and that he would check and come back to MS outside the meeting.</p>
6.	<p>Fairglen Interchange</p> <p>MR provided an updated on the Fairglen Interchange scheme and outlined the proposals included as part of the short-term scheme.</p> <p>MS asked for clarification about where a proposed slip road would tie in, and this was clarified by MR and SP.</p>

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	<p>MR provided an update on the latest indicative programme for the project and explained there were significant funding challenges which needed to be overcome before construction could commence. He said he hoped to be able to give a clearer timeline when the group next met.</p> <p>Action: LS questioned whether the programme slide should be further caveated to make it clearer about current uncertainties and challenges which might mean the dates change.</p> <p>AS reverted back to the retrunking item and asked whether the council should continue to press for the A127 to be retrunked in addition to the A13 and questioned why they seemed to be regarded as mutually exclusive. SP agreed there was not necessarily a reason to stop lobbying and making the case for the A127, but he did say he understood the DfT was only currently looking to trunk one route in South Essex.</p> <p>Action: SP advised he and BP would request more detail from the DfT about the case for retrunking the A13 and the rationale for recommending that route over the A127.</p>
7.	<p>Next steps</p> <p>MR provided a summary of next steps for the A127-related projects, noting that LTP4 was expected to be developed by spring 2024, along with a South Essex Future Transport Strategy and draft implementation plan. He reiterated that a strategic outline case for the A127 MRN project was expected to be submitted in early 2024.</p> <p>MR said it was suggested the A127 Engagement Group would meet approximately two or three times a year and the next meeting could be organised to coincide with the submission of the final business case for the Fairglen scheme.</p> <p>Action: TC agreed and said the next meeting should also be coordinated with the next Local Member Forum. He said he would like to maintain momentum now the group had met again after a long hiatus.</p>
8.	<p>AOB</p> <p>MS asked whether the second phase of improvements at Fairglen Interchange would still come forward or whether that would depend on the Future Transport Strategy.</p> <p>MR advised the long-term scheme would be considered as part of the strategy and emphasised that previous work would not be lost.</p> <p>MS said he was concerned the short-term scheme had taken such a long time to come forward that the second phase might now be delayed. MR advised that significant development would be needed to justify the long-term scheme and that taking a step back to ensure it is a good strategic fit was a worthwhile exercise and would not make much difference to the overall delivery programme.</p>

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	<p>MS emphasised the need to ensure the strategy was progressed in discussion with Southend City Council and MR reiterated that Southend would be involved and provide input into the development strategy.</p> <p>TC thanked everyone for their attendance and officers for their continued hard work, and said he was pleased to have the meetings running again.</p> <p>Action: TC advised members should expect to receive invites for the next meeting and the Local Member Forum ahead of the Christmas period.</p> <p>AS thanked TC for picking up the A127 projects and getting the meetings running again so soon after he had assumed responsibility for the portfolio.</p> <p>TC thanked everyone again and closed the meeting.</p>
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