

Seventh meeting of the A127 Economic Growth Corridor Task Force

Date: Friday 4 December 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 (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 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 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

Rebecca Harris MP (RH) – MP for Castle Point

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

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

Janice Burgess (JB) – Highways England

Ian Lewis (IL) – Opportunity South Essex

Item 1: Welcome and opening remarks by Cllr Andrew Sheldon, Chair of A127 Working Group and Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chair of the A127 Task Force

AS welcomed everyone to the meeting and initiated introductions. He then handed to KB to re-iterate the purpose of the task force.

KB stated the A127 needed to be back in the strategic road network and that the local authorities were not in a position to fund the required upgrades. He emphasised that the road had a growing

major international airport at one end, areas of economic importance all along the route and housing growth coming. He stated he was, therefore, delighted Highways England had joined the call. The objective of the task force remained to make the re-trunking case to Government and ensure the corridor received the investment it needed not just now but well into the future.

Item 2: Actions of previous meeting

MR outlined progress with the various actions from the last meeting, noting that the minutes from the previous meeting had been uploaded to the website, a representative from Opportunity South Essex had been invited to future meetings and the A127 webpage had been updated to reflect the renewed focus on re-trunking of the A127.

MR explained that contact had been made with the project team for the Fairglen Interchange scheme following a previous query about proposed cycling improvements and that an update would be provided in due course once information was available.

MR stated that the project timelines had been updated and that potential rail infrastructure improvements along the A127 corridor would be discussed at a future working group meeting.

MS asked about progress on the northern cycle route at the Fairglen junction and MR reiterated that discussions had been initiated on this and an update would follow.

MS stated that a planning application was expected for a scheme close to the junction and suggested that also needed to be considered.

NS referred to the proposed Lower Thames Crossing and suggested that traffic would use the Fairglen junction to access the A130 and A12. He said it was, therefore, important that the Fairglen junction was considered as part of the next round of consultation about the Lower Thames Crossing.

IL said the Development Consent Order (DCO) application for the Lower Thames Crossing project had been withdrawn, with a potential new submission next Easter once all initial planning inspectorate observations had been addressed.

AS re-iterated the big ambitions for the A127 and was keen to ensure everyone on the task force knew where things were.

Item 3 – Timeline and project milestones

TR provided an update on the overarching timeline for the A127 re-trunking, Fairglen and Major Road Network junction (MRN) improvement schemes. He explained that further detail was still needed in relation to the re-trunking project and that the approach and next steps were subject to discussion with the Department for Transport (DfT).

He explained that there was no significant update in terms of the Fairglen scheme, with the tender assessment still being completed, the contract expected to be awarded in summer 2021 and construction to begin autumn 2021.

TR stated that a strategic outline business case was expected to be submitted for the MRN schemes early in the new year, an outline business case next autumn and a final business case in 2022/23, ahead of an earliest possible construction start date in 2023/24. He stressed that the MRN project was still in very early stages and that the project milestones and timeline were, therefore, subject to change.

RH noted she had an upcoming meeting with the Roads Minister, Baroness Vere, and said she would raise re-trunking the A127 with her. AS suggested a brief pre-meet ahead of this. ACTION

KB thanked RH for her support in raising the matter and said it was necessary to create as much noise as possible about the A127, as had been done – and proved successful – with the A120. He added that business support was also critical to this and requested that Opportunity South Essex helped secure support for the campaign from businesses.

MB pointed to Brexit and questioned any procurement impact on the Fairglens scheme. Cllr Bentley said it depended on timing and when the tender process started but did not believe there would be an impact.

Item 4 – Working group update

MR gave an overview of the response from Baroness Vere to a letter sent by KB and AS outlining the need for the A127 to be re-trunked. He summarised that she had recognised the importance of the road network in South Essex and was keen that roads were managed at the right level, with trunk roads only being those that perform a key strategic role.

KB stressed the A127 was a vital economic corridor, not just a road. He added that there needed to be greater collaboration between the DfT and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government regarding forthcoming growth.

MR stated that a meeting was being arranged with the DfT, hopefully for January, to establish next steps and progress discussions about re-trunking the A127. He added that a file of evidence had already been submitted to the DfT back in 2018 and would be updated for resubmission as evidence of the case for re-trunking. ACTION

MR said that the Roads Minister had again reiterated that re-trunking was no guarantee of successfully securing future funding.

AS praised the project team, working group and the amount of evidence that had already been compiled. He stated that the next step was to use that evidence to make the case for the A127 to be re-trunked and establish a clear pathway for the project.

IW said he was astounded at the apparent lack of understanding at ministerial level about the strategic importance of the A127 and that there needed to be greater appreciation that it was a major arterial and economic corridor, not just for Essex and the South East, but the whole country.

KB agreed and said the A127 was vital to the whole of the South East and not just south Essex. He emphasised the minister should be continually reminded about the importance of the corridor, including its criticality in relation to the Lower Thames Crossing. He stressed evidence and persuasion were key.

CH stated that South Essex had huge potential which the DfT could help unlock even further by acknowledging the role of the A127. He suggested that the growth prospectus compiled by the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) could be provided to DfT to help emphasise the importance of the A127 corridor.

RH said discussions with the Treasury should take place about the economic importance of the A127.

AS again thanked officers for the phenomenal speed of work to progress the project.

Item 5: Project updates

GL advised that the A127 webpage had been updated to reflect the focus on getting the A127 re-trunked and managed as part of the Strategic Road Network. He explained that the webpage featured information about the strategic importance of the A127, the current issues and problems, planned growth in South Essex, the role of the Task Force and the need for the A127 to be re-trunked. He added that further updates would be made as the project progressed and the campaign intensified.

GL explained that the key role of the webpage was to link all of the key messages together and provide a central source of information that was consistent with all other communications. He emphasised the importance of having a single voice for the campaign.

CH offered to promote the website via his networks.

AS reflected that the topic of re-trunking was a complex one and communicating with the public would be a challenge. He added that users of the A127 would be unlikely to think about the bigger picture and strategic vision for the corridor.

GL explained that a draft brochure had also been developed, focused on the need for investment in the A127, growth in South Essex and the current issues along the route. He explained that reference continued to be made to the successful A120 campaign in shaping plans for engagement about the A127, however one key difference was that the A120 had an identified scheme and clear associated benefits, which the A127 did not.

IW questioned whether projects were being future-proofed to consider electric vehicles, artificial intelligence and other technological enhancements.

KB stated that the best approach was to tailor the communications campaign for different audiences. He suggested lapel badges were produced to help provide visibility for the campaign. He said he did not feel the case for re-trunking and associated benefits needed to be fully defined before commencing with public-facing communications activity. ACTION

RH asked whether there had been any discussion with Essex Chambers of Commerce and was advised this was planned and had been very effective in supporting the A120 campaign. ACTION

IL said that Opportunity South Essex would also be able to help communication with businesses.

GL thanked IL for the offer and emphasised the importance of third-party endorsement. ACTION

TR outlined the next steps for the re-trunking project. He explained that a meeting was being organised with the DfT to discuss the strategic road network extent, which was being reviewed. He reiterated that evidence submitted to the DfT in 2018 was being refreshed to make the case for re-trunking and would include traffic flow data, an asset register, growth plans, information about environmental and air quality conditions and aspirations for route enhancements.

IL provided further clarity about the withdrawal of the DCO application for the Lower Thames Crossing following a question from IW. He emphasised that the scheme had not been cancelled and that the spending review had shown funding was still available for the project. He added that he felt 'levelling up', particularly in relation to Southend and other areas of deprivation in South Essex, could be another argument for re-trunking and investing in the A127.

JB explained that meetings were scheduled with the DfT in the New Year and advised that, together with Highways England, it was revising consultees for future route strategies and network extent

proposals. She offered to recommend the A127 Task Force be added to the consultee list, so it had an opportunity to feed directly into the process.

KB said the Task Force would take part and was happy to be named on the list of consultees. ACTION

NS recommended the Thames Estuary Envoy (Kate Willard) be invited to a future task force meeting and IL indicated he would be happy to update her in the meantime. ACTION

Item 6: Interfacing Projects

TR provided an update on projects that had an interface with the A127, in particular the MRN schemes, to which Baroness Vere had referred in her recent letter. He reminded the task force that an initial MRN bid was submitted in September 2019 and that the A127 schemes were among those announced as approved to proceed to the next stage of development in the 2020 spring budget. He explained that the initial three schemes were for the Warley, Fortune of War and Halfway House junctions. TR added that there had also been discussion with DfT about another junction, Pound Lane, and that an MRN scheme was also being developed for that but that it was a stage behind the other three.

TR said that initial workshops had taken place with partners, including representatives from the district and borough councillors, to look at the problems at the junctions and objectives for the schemes. He explained that a revised list of problems and objectives was now being compiled and would help inform the options that were generated and considered.

TR added that a South Essex model had also been completed and would be used to update the case for re-trunking the A127. He said there had also been positive discussions with the DfT specifically about the MRN schemes and that a meeting, separate from the one about re-trunking, was being organised for January to review progress with the projects. ACTION

CH referred to two of the MRN projects being in Brentwood and asked that he and his Chief Executive received the output of the problems and objectives workshop. ACTION

JF also requested information from the workshops, particularly in relation to the proposed schemes in the Basildon borough. ACTION

IW questioned whether colleagues at Southend Borough Council were being kept informed about developments with the A127 and AS advised Cllr Ron Woodley was on the task force and also deputy chair of the working group, although not in attendance at this particular meeting.

GL gave a brief update on the Basildon Air Quality Project and explained that a public engagement survey was currently live regarding proposals to address air pollution in an area of Basildon. He explained that the preferred option aimed to reduce people's exposure to poor air quality and advised that there were also a number of other separate projects in Basildon devised to improve air quality and encourage cleaner forms of travel. GL advised that the online survey was live until 13 December.

JF said he was supportive of the project and Basildon Council would continue to promote the survey.

Item 7: Any other business

CH questioned the visibility of London Southend Airport signage, particularly on the motorway network and said it could be promoted better in this way. He suggested Highways England may wish to consider this. Cllr Steptoe supported the suggestion, saying he knew the airport CEO had been pushing for this.

AS suggested Friday 26 February 2021 as a date for the next meeting and closed the meeting, thanking everyone for their attendance and wishing them a Happy Christmas.