



Meeting of Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) - Joint Committee

Date: Thursday, 10th February, 2022

Place: Council Chamber, Castle Point Borough Council, Kiln Road, Thundersley, Benfleet, SS7 1TF

Present: Councillors S Wootton (Vice-Chair, in the Chair)
Councillors A Baggott (Leader - Basildon Borough Council), I Gilbert (Leader - Southend-on-Sea Borough Council) and P Varker (Deputy Leader - Castle Point Borough Council)
P Glading (Opportunity South Essex (Co-opted Member))

In Attendance: I Butt (Castle Point Borough Council), L Carpenter (Chief Executive - Thurrock Borough Council), M Doran (Essex County Council), A Hutchings (Rochford District Council), A Horgan (Castle Point Borough Council), S Logan (Chief Executive - Basildon Borough Council), S Tautz (Southend-on-Sea Borough Council (Secretariat)), A Wardle (ASELA Communications Lead) and L Wosko (Castle Point Borough Council)

Start/End Time: 10.00 am - 11.55 am

14 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor C Hossack (Chair) (Leader - Brentwood Borough Council), Councillor K Bentley (Leader – Essex County Council), M Coxshall (Cabinet Member - Thurrock Borough Council), A Sheldon (Leader - Castle Point Borough Council) (Substitute: Councillor P Varker), G Jones (Chief Executive - Essex County Council), A Lewis (Chief Executive - Southend-on-Sea Borough Council) and J Stephenson (Joint Chief Executive - Brentwood Borough Council and Rochford District Council).

15 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

16 Minutes of Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 28 October 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

17 Lower Thames Crossing

The Joint Committee received a presentation from M Palmer, Executive Director (Lower Thames Crossing) of Highways England, with regard to the current

proposals for the new A122 and the proposed Lower Thames Crossing, that was designed to provide relief for the existing Dartford Crossing from 2029.

M Palmer presented an overview of the development of the Lower Thames Crossing proposal and its intended positive impact on the delivery of skills, education and employment opportunities in the region, the proposed approach of Highways England to the mitigation of the impact of the new crossing on the environment in South Essex, and the plans for the crossing to support decarbonisation through low carbon emissions during construction and to deliver appropriate upskilling across construction industries to achieve a lasting positive legacy from the project.

The Joint Committee was advised that the Lower Thames Crossing would be a significant enabler of the current ASELA key programmes, particularly in support of the ambition for Thames Freeport and the future skills requirements to be delivered by the proposed South Essex Technical University, and that it was therefore important that the respective lead Chief Executive for each programme should work closely with M Palmer/Highways England to identify and progress opportunities to support each programme that arise from the development of the proposed crossing.

It was reported that the ASELA Communications Lead would also be able to provide support for appropriate engagement and communications activity around the benefits to the ASELA key programmes arising from the planning and delivery of the new Lower Thames Crossing.

Resolved:

- (1) That the current position with regard to the new A122 and the proposed Lower Thames Crossing, be noted.
- (2) That the lead Chief Executive for each of the ASELA key programmes work with M Palmer/Highways England to identify and progress appropriate opportunities arising from the proposed Lower Thames Crossing to support the delivery of the key programmes.
- (3) That the appreciation of the Joint Committee for his attendance at the meeting, be extended to M Palmer.

18 Association of South Essex Local Authorities - Finance Report

The lead Chief Financial Officer presented a report setting out the financial position of ASELA and the key programmes for February 2022, including budgeted income and expenditure, which provided assurance in relation to the arrangements for financial management and reporting in respect of the budget for 2021/22.

The Joint Committee was advised that the finance report now provided detail of the additional funding provided by the ASELA authorities and the income received from other partners for 2021/22, as requested at the previous meeting, alongside the budgeted income for 2022/23 and an initial budget forecast for 2023/24.

It was reported that the budget for 2021/22 currently forecast an in-year deficit of £66,000, which would be met from reserves arising from underspends in previous years, but that it was anticipated that the financial position of would show an £11,000 surplus for 2021/22 at year-end. The lead Chief Financial Officer reported that, at the present time, there were no financial issues or concerns to be brought to the attention of members.

The Joint Committee was advised that a surplus of £25,000 was currently forecast for 2022/23, although the ongoing level of such surplus would evolve alongside the development of appropriate business cases for the key programmes over the year.

Resolved:

That the ASELA finance report for February 2022, be noted.

19 Thames Freeport Programme - Highlight Report

The Joint Committee received a report setting out the current progress of the Thames Freeport programme.

It was reported that Rt Hon Ruth Kelly had recently been appointed as the interim Chair of the Thames Freeport Governing Board and that the final business case for the Freeport had been submitted to the Government on 8 January 2022. The Joint Committee noted that the business case was now be considered by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Treasury and that, following approval of the business case, the Board would be expanded to include other stakeholders.

The Joint Committee was reminded that the Thames Freeport programme was aligned with the successful delivery of each of the other ASELA key programmes and that the £6m skills levy committed by the private sector leaders of the Thames Freeport initiative would provide significant support for the establishment of the proposed South Essex Technical University. The Joint Committee was advised that the outcomes arising from the establishment of the Thames Freeport would benefit not only the immediate area of the Freeport, but also have positive impacts across South Essex whilst also complementing the aspirations set out in the recently published Levelling Up White Paper.

The Joint Committee considered that it was important for the success of the programme, that the aspirations of ASELA for the Thames Freeport be conveyed beyond the scope of the current key private sector partners, to ensure that small and medium-size enterprises were also engaged with the programme and were aware of the benefits that could be generated for local businesses by the operation of the Freeport.

Resolved:

That the progress of the Thames Freeport programme be noted and that the continued provision of support to deliver the programme, be endorsed.

20 Infrastructure & Housing Programme - Highlight Report

The Joint Committee received a report setting out the current progress of the Infrastructure and Housing programme.

It was reported that the place-based partnership between ASELA and Homes England had been formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Chair of the Joint Committee and the Chair of Homes England on 17 January 2022. The Joint Committee was advised that Memorandum of Understanding represented one of only two such accelerated housing partnerships across England and enabled ASELA to work alongside Homes England at a more strategic level than would normally be possible by individual local authorities, but that discussions on the funding of specific projects would continue to be held directly with local authorities by Homes England, where appropriate. The Joint Committee was informed that further work was currently planned to strengthen links between housing associations, small and medium-size enterprises and ASELA, to increase capacity for accelerated housing provision.

The Joint Committee was advised that work had commenced on a project to vision new settlements and urban extensions through appropriate engagement, although it was emphasised that the planning of such new settlements and extensions would remain a sovereign matter for individual local authorities. It was reported that Essex County Council were providing impetus to the work around the visioning of new settlements and urban extensions to ensure that its ambitions for sustainable transport and active travel were designed into new settlements, to provide relevant infrastructure and facilitate appropriate behaviour change.

It was reported that a draft version of the non-statutory South Essex Joint Strategic Framework designed to complement the local plans of each local authority was nearing completion and that it was anticipated that this would be rolled-out for discussion with Leaders and relevant Cabinet Members/Portfolio Holders over the next month.

Resolved:

- (1) That the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between ASELA and Homes England be noted.
- (2) That the proposed further work to unlock housing sites already approved by constituent ASELA local authorities, be approved.
- (3) That the further planned action to support market stimulation, including work with housing associations, small and medium-size enterprises and guidelines for new settlements and urban extensions, be noted.

21 South Essex Estuary Park (SEE Park) Programme - Highlight Report

The Joint Committee received a report setting out the current progress of the South Essex Estuary Park (SEE Park) programme.

It was reported that work was progressing well on the initial stages of the programme, which was closely linked with the development of the South Essex Joint Strategic Framework and the other key programmes of ASELA. The Joint Committee was reminded that the aspiration of the SEE Park programme was for the provision of 23,000 hectares of 'green and blue' infrastructure across South

Essex, and that it was therefore necessary for elements of the programme to be delivered over time and in conjunction with the aspects of the other key programmes.

The Joint Committee was advised that the draft design for the first phase of the demonstrator project at the Central Thames Marshland had been completed and that draft business cases for each of the other proposed landscape spaces were being developed for future consideration by the Committee, to provide a high-level overview of the SEE PARK delivery programme and identify potential project partners and funding streams. It was reported that Metal had been appointed to support the Creative Workstream within the programme to facilitate the development of the creative and cultural arising from the SEE PARK.

The Joint Committee considered that it was important for the success of the programme, that the aspirations of ASELA for the concept of the connected SEE Park across local authority boundaries, be explained as part of an appropriate communications strategy that also set out how the establishment of the SEE Park would address the existing carbon reduction and biodiversity objectives of the individual ASELA authorities.

Resolved:

That the progress of the SEE Park programme be noted and that the continued support to deliver the programme, be endorsed.

22 Full Fibre Digital Programme - Highlight Report

The Joint Committee received a report setting out the current progress of the Full Fibre Digital programme.

It was reported that infrastructure laying for the Phase 2 of the local full fibre network scheme was progressing well and that full fibre connectivity had now been achieved or identified for over 200 public sector sites across South Essex. The Joint Committee was advised that the programme was currently focussed on opportunities for the leverage of investment from fibre carriers and infrastructure providers and the delivery of 'Taking of Service' work to ensure that connected sites could derive best value for local areas from connectivity with the full fibre infrastructure. The Joint Committee was informed that a report in respect of the procurement framework arrangements for Taking of Service for village halls and community centres being led by Brentwood Borough Council, would be made to the next meeting.

The Joint Committee was advised that a communication strategy around the local impacts and benefits arising from the delivery of the Full Fibre Digital programme and the lessons learnt from pilot scheme hosted by Thurrock Borough Council to reduce social isolation in sheltered accommodation, was currently being developed.

It was reported that market engagement with fibre carriers and infrastructure providers that had expressed interest in investing in the region and the alignment of private sector investment with the priorities of ASELA, was a key aspect of the delivery of the Full Fibre Digital programme, to ensure that connectivity was rolled out as quickly as possible. The Joint Committee was advised that the delivery of

the programme would also continue to focus on ensuring that coverage 'Not Spots' across the region were identified and addressed, to ensure that the achievement of an inclusive digital infrastructure going forward.

Resolved:

- (1) That the progress of the Full Fibre Digital programme be noted and that the continued support to deliver the programme, be endorsed.
- (2) That details of the public sector sites across South Essex for which full fibre connectivity has been completed pursuant to Phase 1 of the programme, and the additional sites identified for full fibre installation as part of Phase 2 of the programme, be circulated to all members of the Joint Committee.

23 South Essex Technical University Programme - Highlight Report

The Joint Committee received a report and presentation setting out the current progress of the South Essex Technical University programme.

It was reported that, following the approval of the feasibility study in early 2021, the first draft of the detailed business case for the proposed South Essex Technical University was being developed to address feedback received from stakeholders and the Partnership Board and was anticipated to be completed by the end of February 2022, for consideration at the next meeting. It was noted that the timescale for approval of the full business case had slipped in order to ensure that it secure the funding needed to progress to the next phase of the programme.

The Joint Committee was advised that the financial model for the Technical University was considered to be commercially viable, although it would require cashflow funding in the start-up phase, but that potential sources of funding were being explored, including through strengthened links with Thames Freeport. It was reported that the development of the proposed Technical University was consistent with the aspirations of the Government set out in the recent Levelling Up White Paper.

It was reported that the Partnership Board was working on the development of a high-level plan to secure the next phase of the programme, including company formation and governance arrangements, the securing of funding to 'pump prime' the programme through engagement with local business and the development of the skills pipeline, and the procurement of an appropriate higher education partner.

The Joint Committee considered that it was important for the success of the programme, that the aspirations of ASELA for the South Essex Technical University be conveyed beyond the scope of the current key private sector partners, to ensure that small and medium-size enterprises were also engaged with the programme and were aware of the benefits that could be generated for local businesses in terms of addressing current and future skills requirements across South Essex.

Resolved:

That the progress on the development of the full business case for the South Essex Technical University, in advance of its presentation to the next meeting of the Joint Committee, be recognised and supported.

24 Association of South Essex Local Authorities - Communications Report

The Joint Committee received an update on recent communications and engagement activity undertaken to support ASELA and the delivery of the current key programmes.

It was reported that progress had been made to update the ASELA communications channels and to increase engagement with the key programmes by stakeholders, through the building of a South Essex 'brand.' The Joint Committee considered proposals for the development of a communications and engagement strategy for ASELA and was advised of several forthcoming events and project milestones that would provide proactive communication and engagement opportunities.

The Joint Committee considered that opportunities to raise the profile of ASELA and the current key programmes, through appropriate engagement with local Members of Parliament to support and promote the success of projects across South Essex, should be investigated as part of the proposed communications and engagement strategy for ASELA.

Resolved:

- (1) That the recent communications and engagement activity to support ASELA and the delivery of the key programmes be noted.
- (2) That the proposed communications and engagement strategy for ASELA be endorsed.
- (3) That details of the respective social media platforms for ASELA and the key programmes be circulated to all members of the Joint Committee.

25 'South Essex No Use Empty' Scheme

The Joint Committee received an overview of the 'No Use Empty South Essex' Scheme for bringing long-term empty properties back into alternative commercial or mixed-use commercial/residential use to aid the revitalisation of town centres.

The Joint Committee was advised that 'No Use Empty' was a project that had been run successfully by Kent County Council for a number of years and was recognised as good practice by the Government and that the relationship of the scheme for South Essex' with Kent County Council had been formalised through a Service Level Agreement, with Southend-on-Sea Borough Council acting as the 'accountable body for the funding of the scheme locally.

It was reported that through work led by Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, grant funding of £2.2m had been secured for the scheme to deliver 10 to 15 projects across South Essex and that the role of the ASELA local authorities would be to publicise and market the scheme locally to ensure that a strong pipeline of potential projects was identified to ensure that return on investment was

maximised. The Joint Committee was advised that the scheme had been launched on 7 February 2022.

The Joint Committee requested that clarification be sought as to whether the £1.2m grant funding received for the Scheme from the 'Getting Building Fund' should be expended on bringing empty properties back into use before the funding of £1m secured from the 'Growing Places Fund', as it was suggested that the grant funding received from the 'Getting Building Fund' might need to be spent by the end of September 2022.

Resolved:

- (1) That the overview of the 'No Use Empty South Essex' Scheme be noted.
- (2) That the ASELA local authorities ensure that their respective Economic Development and Regeneration and Teams are involved in promoting the opportunities provided by the Scheme for their areas and the ASELA partnership.
- (3) That opportunities for appropriate publicity to promote the support of ASELA for the launch of the Scheme, be investigated.
- (4) That the success of the Scheme and the operation of the Service Level Agreement with Kent County Council be reviewed by the Joint Committee at an appropriate juncture.