



Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 4 September 2024 when there were present:-

Chair: Cllr G Watson

Cllr S Ainsley
Cllr N Benson
Cllr K Bowker
Cllr L Breading
Cllr S Brooke
Cllr M Cortes

Cllr A Edwards
Cllr D Jones
Cllr K Knott
Cllr L Larman
Cllr D Thomas
Cllr B Wimbledon

OFFICERS PRESENT

A Hutchings - Chief Executive
D Ghela - Assistant Director, Housing, Health & Partnerships
S Worthington - Democratic Services Manager

6 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

7 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 30 July 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

8 SOUTH ESSEX COUNCILS UPDATE

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive on the work of the South Essex Councils Joint Committee. She provided a verbal update as follows:

The Council is a member of South Essex Councils (SEC) which comprises Castle Point, Basildon, Brentwood, Rochford, Southend, Thurrock and Essex County Councils.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee has a role to scrutinise the work of SEC and the decisions of the SEC Joint Committee through the lens of CPBC.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 4 September 2024

The last update provided to this committee was on 6 March 2024 – so before this current configuration of members.

The Joint Committee planned for 26 March 2024 did not go ahead because of the local elections. Instead informal workshops were scheduled as part of the development of the Economic Growth Plan for Action for South Essex, facilitated and led by consultants, Inner Circle and Metro Dynamics.

The consultants initially met with Leaders and chief executives, to gauge priorities and inform the gap analysis between where we are vs where we want to be - filling in evidence gaps and use external expertise to create the right pathway to boost growth and productivity in the region- working together to agree a compelling, unified economic rationale for South Essex and ensure shared ownership and action.

The first workshop was on 24 April 2024 and was with officers to explore and agree the economic strengths, challenges, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of the SEC region. It explored qualitative insight and quantitative information and discuss what this means for South Essex's current state and future economic trajectory.

Work was then paused during the General Election period.

The second workshop with Leaders and CEOs took place on 2 September 2024 - to explore and agree on the size of the economic prize, and discuss the trade-offs, priorities and principles required to realise the potential of the SEC area. At that workshop, it was agreed that political leaders needed to meet together to agree a way forward on some key issues immediately affecting the SEC geography and which would impact on the way in which we approach the development of the Economic Growth Plan. These included the potential for spatial planning mooted by the new Government's proposals around planning reform and the SEC approach to the new Government's early indications about devolution. In addition, following local elections there has been a number of changes in leadership across the SEC authorities and so there is a need to agree a new chair and vice chair.

The expectation is that by the end of September, there will be a refreshed direction of travel for SEC and a forward plan for the Joint Committee following which it will then be possible to prepare a formal update report for members to scrutinise.

In response to a Member question relating to the roll out of fibre optic broadband in the borough, the Chief Executive advised that although there was an expectation that Virgin Cable would do this; to date it has not

materialised. She had conversations with a number of other providers and City Fibre and BT Open Reach are now investing in fibre optic broadband for the borough.

Responding to a Member question as to whether SEC discussions around investment in the region included potential investment in a third road for Canvey Island, the Chief Executive referred to the sorts of challenges that HS2 had suffered as an example of the barriers to achieving new roads. The costs of major investment in new infrastructure were extortionate, often required compulsory purchase powers and could be divisive. There was also an argument that locating a new road would cut through large areas of Green Belt and the engineering infrastructure required to deliver it was not something that the Department for Transport would normally consider as part of the major road network. It was the kind of major investment that would require targeted central government intervention.

As part of the SEC Economic Growth Plan work, it was clear that growth cannot happen without consideration of infrastructure. SEC has not been prescriptive about what that infrastructure might look like because digital infrastructure was equally important for growth and prosperity and was a key indicator for employers locating in a particular area. Housing was also important as employers sought places where employees could live in; geographical areas with the right people possessing the right skills. Discussions were not simply about whether there should be a new road; it was more about whether plans for economic growth across the sub region require additional infrastructure and, if so, what would that infrastructure look like. This was done in the context of access to work and the freeport offers the greatest new opportunity in the sub-region whilst the Thames estuary is the primary investment area for central government. That includes a number of things including, for example, light railway, using the river, other forms of public transport so not necessarily a road. It doesn't mean that it's not a road; however, discussions are conceptual.

Discussions around the kind of investment needed to support new access ways, irrespective of whether this is road, rail or water, include the requirement to demonstrate an economic benefit for this and that it returns something to the Treasury. Part of building the economic business case for the sub region is demonstrating that in order to break the barrier between a two tier work force you need to make some investment in infrastructure to support the lower tier work force to move into those jobs. If that's not done then there is a risk of creating a three tier work force as you would create highly skilled jobs that aren't necessarily taken by local people. A Member observed that there shouldn't be reference to a third road as this gives the

impression that we already have two roads off the island. Technically there are two roads; however, all roads lead to one pinch point. It should instead be referred to as an alternative route. The Chief Executive agreed but stressed that the A127 and A13 corridors were in exactly the same position. Rail connectivity from north to south was also poor. When discussing this kind of infrastructure the issue should be focused on connecting people with jobs and jobs to skills so that we are opening up the sub region rather than closing it down.

In response to a Member question relating to biodiversity net gain trading, the Chief Executive advised that the work on the south east Essex park (“SEEPark”) was looking at the blue green infrastructure across the sub region from Thurrock and the Purfleet Marshes to Paglesham and Wallasea Island. Castle Point has a number of wetlands, green grassland and coastline. Conversations are ongoing with the Thames Estuary Growth Board as to how the SEEPark project can be taken forward. The Board has a mandate around unlocking green financing and to move away from ‘green washing’ to projects that deliver core values around greenification. BNG is one of those; there are also, for example, carbon credits. The Board is looking at ways to use the green blue infrastructure and SEEPark to create a green finance platform which will enable business to invest in the project and therefore achieve benefits through BNG or carbon credits but also in relation to flood risk mitigation, for example. With TEGB, SEC applied to the government innovation fund and wasn’t successful. However, the feedback received was very positive so that would go back to the Growth Board and in due course it would go back to the next meeting of the Joint Committee to approve a funding bid document that could be used for other funding bids. The spatial planning messages coming out of government as part of planning reforms in a letter from the Minister refer to priority groupings of authorities where strategic planning would provide particular benefits hints at a devolution promise. The indication appears to be that spatial planning may allow for special dispensation as part of the planning reforms coming forward so it will be necessary to see how South Essex can benefit from that. The SEEPark project cuts across the whole of the South Essex sub region. This is a useful corollary to investment in infrastructure as it affords the means by which we can start to pay for some of the infrastructure. In terms of the issue of returning back to the Treasury that investment in infrastructure, the innovative work that is taking place around SEEPark may allow us to have those sorts of conversations with government. The Economic Growth Action Plan being developed by SEC is looking at how we can generate economic growth and investment, along with housing and infrastructure while protecting nature and blue green infrastructure at the same time. It was very complex but was more relevant now than it’s ever been.

Responding to a Member question relating to an alternative route for Canvey Island and as to whether a more realistic option might be a third lane for Canvey Way that could be used as a contraflow allowing people to access Thurrock and the port by using the slip road down the A13 in the mornings and then two lanes in the evening to Canvey Island, the Chief Executive advised that there were potential solutions such as this that could be explored. The issue was around the financing of such solutions and the ability to demonstrate a return on investment.

In response to a supplementary Member question around whether an alternative route for Canvey could be prioritised in the context of life and safety, for example, in the event of Canvey flooding, the Chief Executive confirmed that emergency planning protocols were in place; the lead local flood authority, Essex County Council, was responsible for these. Central government was responsible for the two COMAH sites in terms of threat to life. In practice, evacuation procedures would not involve a large-scale movement of people from the island.

Responding to a Member question as to whether there was a forward plan for spending the substantial balances held for the SEC Joint Committee, the Chief Executive advised that the work of SEC was paid by a subscription paid by each of the seven councils, who all paid one seventh each. Each of the councils had equal representation on the Joint Committee. Work undertaken at the recent workshop and political leadership meetings throughout September were intended to pull together a forward plan. To date the work has been focused on a number of work streams. Some of these take a long time to come to fruition as they are things that will affect residents way into the future. The momentum around strategic planning, devolution, the Greater Essex Business Board, the freeport and the Thames Estuary Growth Board creates a real sense of now that will allow the creation of a forward plan around a focused set of outcomes around improving economic growth and attracting business.

In response to a Member question as to whether there were any plans to enhance provision for apprenticeships, the Chief Executive stated that there was a real push around skills and work. The national body was not strategic around skills; it was more focused on dispensing funding. The County Council had awarded the learning skills improvement partnership (LSIP) contract to the Essex Chambers of Commerce and this would drive the importance of skills, both at the school leaver level and the older, re-training stage. South Essex would become more involved in that under any devolution deal. The South Essex Advanced Technical Skills (SEATS) programme has already

begun. They are providing training for young people and people of all ages around engineering and other STEM activity sponsored entirely by private sector providers who are offering jobs. These are graduate level training/apprenticeship opportunities offered, for example, by Leonardo, Ford, Natwest. In time it is anticipated that this will be developed to provide more courses, with associated accommodation for SEATS.

Resolved

To note the update on South Essex Councils.

9 UPDATE ON THE WORK OF THE CLIMATE POLICY & SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

It was noted that an update would be received at the next meeting as the Sub-Committee was not due to meet until 17 September 2024.

10 WORKPLAN

The Committee agreed to set up a Constitution Working Group with the following Members:

Cllr S Ainsley; Cllr L Breeding; Cllr A Edwards; Cllr D Jones

In response to a Member question around the new Essex County Council waste disposal contract awarded to Indaver and how waste would be dealt with in future, the Chief Executive confirmed that she would ask the Assistant Director, Waste & Recycling to provide details to the committee of the company and what they would be doing in terms of the waste contract. If the committee felt, following receipt of this information, that it would be useful to invite them to attend a committee meeting then an invitation would be extended.

In response to a Member question as to whether invitations could be extended to invite people to attend the committee on 23 October to provide information in respect of the Local Walking and Cycling Improvement Plan, officers advised that this could be insufficient notice given that this was due to come to the next meeting. However, the Assistant Director, Climate & Growth would be asked if this could be done.

Officers advised, in response to a Member query around whether questions relating to Canvey Lake could be asked at the meeting in February to which representatives from Anglian Water and the Environment Agency would be

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 4 September 2024

invited, officers advised that this would not be appropriate as Canvey Lake was the responsibility of Canvey Island Town Council, not the Borough Council.

The meeting closed at 7.48 pm.

Chair

Date

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