

Minutes of the Meeting of the Planning, Transport, Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9 February 2016 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillors Brian Little (Chair), Martin Kerin (Vice-Chair), Robert Gledhill, Steve Liddiard, Robert Ray and Peter Smith

In attendance: Councilor John Kent, Leader of the Council
Councilor Oliver Gerrish, Cabinet member for Highways and Transport
Councilor Gerard Rice, Cabinet member for Environment
Councilor Lynn Worrall, Cabinet member for Housing
Councilor Tim Aker,
Councilor Susan Little,
David Bull, Director of Planning and Transportation
Ann Osola, Head of Highways & Transportation
Jessica Feeney, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting may be filmed and was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

29. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on the 20 January 2016 were approved as a correct record subject to amending Item 22 to read that Councillor Gledhill had a declaration of interest in respect of Agenda Item 5, C2C timetable changes as his partner was a C2C service user.

30. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

31. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Smith declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to all items on the agenda as he received payments from Councillor Aker for various duties relating to Cllr Aker's role as an MEP although these were not related or linked to the Lower Thames Crossing.

The Chair of the Committee declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to all items on the agenda as most of the Lower Thames Crossing routes affected his ward, and various residents in his ward had received letters from Highways England.

32. Lower Thames Crossing Witness Session Update

The Director of Planning and Transportation updated the Committee regarding the Lower Thames Crossing Witness Session which was held prior to the Planning, Transport and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Members were informed that businesses, residents, community forums and charities were given an opportunity to share their views on the new proposals. The following questions were raised by these groups at the witness session:

- Why option D was ruled out and could it be relooked at?
- Why the outer ring option was not being considered.
- What was the problem that the crossing was aiming to resolve? It was felt that the problem was revised as the consultation continued.
- How Highways England and the Government would ensure that community severance would not have a major impact on the local people and that people would not be isolated.
- Would houses be built next to the new road in the green belt?
- Would a 14% traffic reduction on the existing crossing be value for money?
- Would the new crossing require Police escorted tankers?
- Was there evidence that work had already begun on both sides of the river?

All interested parties were concerned about the flood risks and air quality impact on Thurrock residents' health and wellbeing. It was felt that the current options were not long term sustainable solutions to traffic growth and that the new routes would not reach their full capacity in the near future.

Interested parties highlighted that statistics used by Highways England were out of date and they alternatively raised many positive aspects of option D. Residents and communities feared that the only wildlife hospital in the region based in Orsett would be affected including rare wildlife. It was also felt that the green belt required to be preserved along with Grade 2 listed buildings.

33. Highways England

The Chair of the Committee welcomed Highways England to make their presentation. The Highways England Group Leader opened the presentation to Members of the Committee highlighting the following key points:

- Development of the proposals were assessed through work with local authorities, environment bodies, commercial organisations and utility companies who were against the scheme objectives based on Economic, Transport, Community and Environment.
- Option C, route 3 was Highways England's proposed solution although routes 3 and 2 options south of the river were to be consulted on.

- It was explained that the new crossing would enable relief to the western end of A127 and A2 and significant relief to the existing Dartford Crossing Corridor, there would also be lesser relief to the M20.

The Committee were informed about the benefits of the proposed scheme, these included 5000 new jobs with £7billion contributed to the economy, unlocking the potential for investment in housing and regeneration. It was explained that the crossing would be a safer, faster and reliable route, which would offer value for money and provide a return on investment.

The Highways Group Manager informed Members that the 8 week consultation period was closing on the 24 March 2016. The Committee were informed that there were 24 information public events, digital and online consultations, public events and questionnaires.

Members were invited to ask questions to Highways England.

Councillor Kerin felt that the proposed Lower Thames Crossing options would not enable communities to flourish and would add significant pressures to the borough. It was stated that Highways England must have a full understanding of the impact. Councillor Rice explained how residents were upset that they had been issued with compulsory purchases. The Highways Group Manager explained that there was no correct time to share the unsettling news, but informed the Committee that 266,000 letters had been sent to make those that may have been affected aware of the consultation before it came to an end.

Councillor Smith shared that communities felt disappointed due to the lack of information specifically regarding air quality statistics. Highways England explained that air quality assessments had been carried out which demonstrated how the preferred options would reduce traffic and recover air quality levels at the QE2 Bridge. It was questioned further by Councillor Smith what was in place to manage the risk of two accidents occurring at both crossings at the same time. The Highways Group Manager explained that national safety improvement targets were incorporated into the plan.

Councillor Ray questioned why route 1 option A, a bridge adjacent to the current QE2 Bridge was discarded. The Highways Group Manager explained that the route was discarded due to the short life assessment which would not offer a substantial return on investment, it was added that the route would also require construction on live carriageways which would be dangerous for contractors. Councillor Ray queried if a tunnel had been considered instead of a bridge, it was confirmed that this was also discarded due to costs.

Councillor Gledhill questioned if the requested junctions for larger businesses such the Port of Tilbury would be included into the consultation. Highways England confirmed that there was a question in the consultation relating to this, Members were informed that this was a decision to be taken by Thurrock's Councillors. It was questioned further what had been put in place

to ensure that Thurrock benefited from the expected 5,000 jobs that were to be available from the Lower Thames Crossing nationally. Highways England informed the Committee that there had been discussion with contractors as to what they would do for local communities such as apprenticeships and training.

Councillor Gledhill queried if the 14% of traffic from the QE2 Bridge being deferred to the proposed Lower Thames Crossing would balance out traffic flow. Highways England explained that a second crossing would enable relief for the QE2 Bridge but would not equally balance out the traffic.

Councillor S Little explained that Orsett residents had received 300 letters from Highways England, it was felt that many other residents were still unaware of the proposals. Councillor Aker questioned if Highways England would post a letter with the consultation documents to every household in Thurrock with a free post return stamp. The Highways Group Manager agreed to look into this and informed the Committee that Highways had reached out to communities in other ways such as adverts, public consultations, and online consultations.

Councillor Snell queried how long it would be before the new Lower Thames Crossing would reach its full capacity. The Highways England Group Manager explained that route C would cope with traffic increases in the future however there was capacity to open a third lane.

Councillor Worrall stated that information regarding the consultation materials and crossings had not been publicised correctly, Councillor Worrall felt that Councillors were carrying out work for Highways England to ensure that their wards were provided with the correct information. The Committee requested that all consultation materials were provided to Thurrock Councillors and residents.

Councillor Gerrish questioned what consultation response was required to discard the Lower Thames Crossing Options. Highways England informed the Committee that an independent consultation analysis by Ipsos MORI would be carried out then a consultation report would be posted to the Government.

The Leader of the Council highlighted that the 300 letters had been sent to residents without any warnings or indication to the Council beforehand. Highways England explained that arrangements were shared as much as possible.

Councillor S Little stated that the out of date statistics used to form the proposals were a risk in relation to the cost and scale of the project.

34. Members Statements

The Chair of the Committee welcomed group representatives to make their statements. It was explain that the group opposed to any new crossings in the borough, The Leader of the Council felt that all options were an economical

and environmental problem. It was highlighted to the Committee that all routes relied on M25 traffic and that a solution away from the M25 must be considered. It was added that an 8 week consultation period for a £6 billion project was felt to be too short for many due to the lack of materials and statistics and outdated resources. The Leader explained that there was no evidence that traffic growth assumptions had been considered, economic data and job agreements. The Leader felt that a £1.2 million investment per job was not good value for money in context of the 5,000 jobs created for the £6 billion project.

Councillor S Little spoke on behalf of the Conservative Group. During the statement it was highlighted to the Committee that the group was firmly against any new crossing in Thurrock, it was added that the crossing to the east of Thurrock 'option D' would have facilitated the additional crossing capacity and would enable an additional route off to Canvey. It was added that a scheme of such tremendous cost and scale must be 100% certain of what it was intended to do. It was highlighted that the effects of the £100million improvements at J30/31 and the £80million widening of the A13 must be considered before proposing the project. It was stated that Highways England proceeding with full knowledge of the air quality issues already present in Thurrock was not good governance.

Councillor Aker spoke on behalf of the UKIP Group it was explained that UKIP opposed the new Thames Crossing and believed it would harm way of life in Thurrock. It was felt that there was no budgeting in the Treasury to fund the crossing and that the only alternative would be to find a foreign investment, meaning almost certain tolling and consequent congestion. Councillor Aker stated that Thurrock had some of the worst air pollution in Europe and that the Lower Thames Crossing would add to this as Thurrock would become the bottleneck of the county losing green belt and homes. The subject of a local referendum was raised to act as a definitive consultation on the matter. It was firmly believed by UKIP that Thurrock must use the options open to do everything in their power to stop the crossing. It was suggested that at the upcoming elections in May, Thurrock should have another ballot paper asking whether Thurrock support the Government's proposed Thames Crossing or not.

The Chair of the Committee welcomed Cabinet Members to make their statements all Cabinet Members were against the Lower Thames Crossing proposals and the following key points were made:

- The concerns over air quality issues and the effects on Thurrock residents' health and wellbeing.
- The loss of green belt throughout the borough
- Impact on communities and the segregation of towns and villages.
- The formation of the proposals on outdated statistics.
- Concerns were raised how some plans at junctions had been instigated although no crossing had been confirmed.
- The request for a longer consultation.

The Chair of the Committee invited Councillor S Little to speak as a ward Councillor on behalf of Orsett. Councillor S Little was against any new Crossing in Thurrock. With regards to option D she felt that Highways England, if they were to proceed, should consider building 3 lanes or more rather than dual carriageways because it anticipate further traffic growth. It was highlighted that option D would have delivered the crossing with ease due to the additional open space which would have prevented segregating communities. Councillor S Little urged that the Council and Members of Parliament insist that Highways England, if deciding to continue with option C, immediately set aside funds to pay for Compulsory Purchase Orders. It was also urged that Highways England visit the widening compensation packages along the route. Councillor Little summed up the three proposed routes explaining that all routes would destroy homes, cycle paths, bridleways, footpaths and other community pastimes and rural green belt. It was added that the crossings would have a major impact on the road network during construction and route 2 and 3 would cause flooding of the fens and the Mardyke Valley.

35. Additional Evidence

The Chair of the Committee read a written statement to Members which was produced by the South Basildon and East Thurrock Member of Parliament Stephen Metcalfe.

The statement highlighted that the objections in principle shared concerns over air quality, environment and the out of date evidence base for the proposals. The MP's statement specified that he remained firmly opposed to all the options, however if following the consultation Highways England were determined to press forward with a new crossing in Thurrock, it was stated that Thurrock must have confidence that this was a genuine consultation and not a public relations exercise.

The MP's statement explained that he remained committed to getting the best deal for Thurrock and promised to do the very best he could to work with all involved to make the best of a very difficult and unsettling situation. The Committee were informed that the MP would be holding a number of drop-in session events for residents to bring their concerns directly, Members were informed that the details for these would be made public in the near future.

36. Lower Thames Crossing Consultation Options

The Director of Planning and Transportation explained that questions raised from both the afternoon and evening session had been recorded and that all queries would be answered. The Committee agreed that the following points from the Witness Session and Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be used to form a report to Cabinet in March:

- The Committee notes the strength of feelings and concerns shown by all interested parties.
- Seeks better engagement and consultation with the public.

- Seeks improved availability of consultation material to all interested parties.
- Seeks an extension of the consultation period.
- Agrees that consultants specifically look at the effects of the 3 proposals on congestion within the borough and the impact on the Strategic Road Network, particularly in the east of borough. Notes concerns were raised regarding M25 congestion.
- That the Scrutiny report would investigate issues around air quality, noise, environment degradation, loss of green belt and impact on health in the borough.
- Issues in relation to the Business Case would be linked into a review of data and whether the proposals would be value for money.
- Consultants would investigate strategic issues in relation to the 14% of traffic rerouting from the Dartford Crossing that would use the Lower Thames Crossing and how quickly the former would reach its full capacity.
- Further details would be sought from Highways England as to local traffic generation and route allocation.
- Notes concern that no considerations had been given to the alternative modal options. The Minister at the Select Committee on Crossings specifically said that sustainable transport and integrated land use and multi module options would be considered. It was explained that Officers would be seeking through their consultants to see if this had taken place and how it would affect decision making when moving towards the preferred option in the future.

The Leader of the Council enlightened the Committee that all interested parties had been informed that there was a 15 working day delay before receiving any response regarding consultation materials from Highways England. The Highways Group Leader explained that all consultation materials were individually franked and had seal numbers. It was added that the service level agreement was 15 working days and that Highways England was unable to promise that papers would be distributed any sooner than that timeframe.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the Committee noted all representations from interested parties and reported their views which would be incorporated into a report to Cabinet in March as part of the development of the Council's response to the Lower Thames Crossing Consultation.**
- 2. That the Director of Planning and Transportation would liaise with the Highways England to ensure that Lower Thames Crossing**

consultation materials and maps are made available to Thurrock Council, members of the public and Councillors.

3. That the Chair of the Committee in agreement with Group Leaders would write a letter to the Secretary of State for Transport. The letter would request that the 300 addresses of residents whom received letters regarding their property being lost/affected would be provided to the Council. The letter would also evidence and request an extension to the consultation period and raise concerns over the inadequate information.

37. Work Programme

RESOLVED:

That the Work Programme be noted.

The meeting finished at 9.00 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**