

Paul Gadd County Councillor Update

Saffron Walden Town Council – Planning and Transport Committee

14/3/24

*[Note, items in italics are repeats from last month, still unresolved]*

1. Flooding and drainage issues:

- a. South Road broken drain – slow progress unfortunately. Essex Highways finally closed the road so that their jetting crew could access the pipe. That discovered a blockage which they couldn't remove. Unhelpfully it is at a deep point and so they need to use a specialist contractor to dig out the road and access the pipe; I've chased but am waiting for them to let me know a date;
- b. Radwinter Rd / Thaxted Rd junction flooding – there is regularly flooding at the Radwinter Road pedestrian crossing because of a blocked drain gully. I have been told that a clearance has been booked, although I haven't managed to get a date yet, but just to let you know that I am chasing regularly;

2. LHP schemes:

- a. The next LHP meeting was to be in the morning of 14/3/24 but has just been delayed until 11 April. We are told that this is because there are new proposals to reduce the huge numbers of outstanding validations, but we've been given the same story repeatedly over the last few years with no sign of any improvement. I have emailed the Cabinet Member for Highways on a number of occasions to discuss the extremely poor service we get from the LHP, but I can't get him even to reply to emails I'm afraid;
- b. In terms of the LHP schemes that were due for delivery by 31/3/23 but weren't delivered:
  - i. the TPOs for the market square regularisation and pedestrianisation – as you know I've been chasing for months / years now. I had a message from the LHP officer saying that we were now too late in the scheme for the regularisation to happen and that it would have to be postponed to the new financial year (despite it being Essex Highways fault for not getting the TRO correct). I'm obviously concerned at the delay and whether this means that they won't even start the pedestrianisation for another year;
  - ii. Essex Highways have now come back on the pedestrianisation scheme to say that they have finally looked at it (the request form was submitted on 19/4/22), and despite having discussed it a number of times have decided that they incorrectly handled it, and want to start from scratch. A new low I'm afraid, even by LHP standards. For your information, I've cut and pasted at the end of this update a copy of their email. I have also raised the issue with the Head of Sustainable Transport as it seems to be another example of the Essex Highways "car first" policy, and have asked whether UDC have modelling work to rebut the unfounded Essex Highways claim of it potentially leading to traffic chaos – pedestrianisation was one of the options that the DEFRA Clean Air modelling was looking at;
  - iii. George St / Hill St build outs – these have actually happened!

- iv. *[9/11/23 - On the Great Chesterford to SW cycle path, the Sustrans scheme was on the west side of the B1383 because ECC Highways hadn't told Sustrans that there were s.106 arrangements to bring a path from Great Chesterford to Little Chesterford on the east side of the B1383. I'm now trying to get the LHP to re-commission the design of the scheme so that the Little Chesterford to Littlebury section is also on the east side;][11/1/24 – I've had confirmation that this has been commissioned and should be prepared in the first 3 months of 2024][14/3/24 – no update]*
- v. *[Street clutter – I still can't get a date for when this will happen] [8/6/23 – no update] [13/7/23 – seems to have gone nowhere – I'll chase][9/11/23 – I still can't get a date][14/12/23 – the LHP is now saying that the scheme will go over budget! I'll see what I can do] [11/1/24 – I'm waiting for the LHP to confirm what is proposed now.][8/2/24 – we have now been asked some questions about this so it appears that they may be taking action][14/3/24 – no update]*
- c. *[8/6/23 - In terms of the schemes which hadn't even got to validation, I'm still chasing on the various zebra crossing requests and whether we can use the Linden Homes money for some of them and am still waiting for answers. I haven't yet had any new validations. The LHP officer said that all LHP schemes were deliberately paused for about 6 months to save money, although we were never told that, and that Essex Highways are now trying to get the design team to full strength to focus on validations, but I've been told that at least 3 times in the last 9 months by the Cabinet Member for Highways, including when I wrote to him this time.] [13/7/23 – no change; still no new validations][11/8/23 – no change][9/11/23 – still no change I'm afraid][14/12/23 – the only new validation was to reject the Water Tower Place ramp! No obvious progress on anything else - I am chasing;][11/1/24 – still no change; I have chased again][8/2/24 – I've chased again and still no progress on anything][14/3/24 – still nothing – I've raised it with the Cabinet Member for Highways but he won't even reply to emails]*
- d. Ross Close measures – as you know, the request for a zebra crossing was refused. I therefore instead applied for some traffic calming / chicane measures (on 14/11/23)
- 3. Highways matters affecting the parish
  - a. Clearly the roads are getting worse and worse – I am chasing frequently but it's getting harder and harder to get anything done;
  - b. Thaxted Rd lighting – Georgia chases me regularly and I in turn chase Essex Highways regularly as to when the Thaxted Rd lights will be restored to operation, but I can't get anything out of Essex Highways. Sorry
- 4. Shire Hill / Linden Homes junction – you may have seen that the junction was briefly open, and various residents then took it upon themselves to open the junction. It is now closed again; following requests from various residents I have tried to get an update on timing for it being opened properly. At the moment, the developer has still to install street lights and comply with various other obligations, and ECC therefore do not want it opened yet; I can't get an indication of timing.
- 5. Cycling, walking and other sustainable transport: [8/2/24 – no update on any of these schemes]
  - a. LHP schemes – see above;

- b. *UDC have commissioned the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan, so that's progress; [14/12/23 – still ongoing. I'm keen also that it includes the SW / Ashdon former railway line as a future walking / cycling scheme] [14/3/24 – no update]*
- c. *[14/12/23 – My request for a cycle path in front of SWCHS to link Saxon Way and the Wenden Rd cycle path is "in validation"] [14/3/24 – no update]*

6. Market Square pedestrianisation – text of Essex Highways email:

*"I believe you may be aware I had a long meeting yesterday with the Design Team Leader, the scheme Engineer and one of the Senior Members of the Network Assurance Team. I hope I have been able to explain previously and given the delays with this one, that this is not a straight forward matter and there have been concerns raised at various times about how we can make a scheme work for the residents, visitors, vehicles users, taxis and business owners in this area, as well as future proofing the scheme without putting onerous and unreasonable responsibility on the Town Council (which we were never comfortable with) and could have resulted in liability issues were things to go wrong.*

*We have agreed a way forward after much discussion, which is an alternative proposal, the new scheme proposal is going to involve compromises for which I hope you are understanding. We cannot deliver on exactly what was proposed within the scheme request. We are not able to formalise the practice currently in place for the management of market operations (on market days), which has never been formally agreed with by Network Assurance and is not using signage approved within the regulations, to which we must adhere, but we hope a potential alternative scheme will be acceptable to you.*

*Fundamentally, what was being trialled during the COVID pandemic in terms of pedestrianisation within the square cannot be made permanent practice in the form set out in the scheme request. However, that is not to say that we cannot deliver an alternative scheme which will achieve the goal of creating a shared public pedestrian space in the Market Square.*

*Were we able to implement a part-time pedestrianisation scheme, as was initially proposed, we would be required to install highway signage for this, for the signs to be correct and in accordance with the regulations they would have needed to be extremely large (to fit all the required wording on) the signs would need to be displayed all the time because of the part-time nature of the proposal (with differing information with regards market days), and on further review it simply just not possible to have signs of this size placed where they would need to be placed within the space available on the highway. Due to the amount of wording legally required the signs themselves would be very difficult to read for the road user.*

*We have concerns about how business owners would operate with deliveries etc needed for the essential operation of their businesses as well as the operations of the taxi rank. I would point out, as you may not be aware, that many of the existing town/city centre pedestrianisation schemes in Essex have experienced problems with managing deliveries and services into these areas as well as access for residents who live within the pedestrianised areas, Network Assurance will not support or agree to a proposal which could result in these sorts of issues, which are challenging, if not impossible to resolve in a way which is satisfactory to all. Network Assurance are the Team who make the Traffic Orders, it is essential that we have their agreement with any scheme of this nature.*

*Another issue we discussed is the lack of turning space on the network which would be required if we were to effectively close off part of the network during the day, there just isn't sufficient space to incorporate the turning of vehicles on the streets adjoining the square, given the signage would be difficult to read it's likely vehicles who do not know the area would still attempt to drive through, we*

would potentially be creating something which could become dangerous and potentially damaging to the adjacent buildings, the roads around the Square are all quite narrow as well as the footways, we could be creating a traffic bottleneck were we able to completely close access off on all sides, which could give rise to complaint and criticism, the last thing we want to do is to put something in place which dissuades people from using the Town Centre shopping area because they cannot access it due to traffic congestion or having to reverse something which time, effort and funds had been devoted to. Although some types of schemes may have worked well during the pandemic, there were far less vehicles on the road during this time, so it is not a true comparison in terms of ordinary traffic volume.

I appreciate this all sounds quite cryptic, but I cannot share the details of this proposal with you before this is drawn up and we take this through an initial road safety assessment, we need to ensure that the proposal does not create a road safety issue for highway users, we need to check this with Road Safety before it can be shared, but I wanted to provide an update as to the way forward.

It is unfortunate and once again I can only apologise that these discussions were not held in advance of the scheme being added to the awaiting funding list, as I explained previously the scheme did not follow the process it should have done in that a scheme validation file was not created for it which could then be shared with Network Assurance and Road Safety to get their approval before the scheme was funded, I can only presume Rissa was in the position of needing to ensure the larger than normal LHP budget was committed to schemes in 2022/23, as a result of the non-delivery the scheme was consequently re-commissioned as a slipped scheme in 2023/24. As a result of this we have struggled to engage with the Network Assurance Team, they were unwilling to meet or discuss this scheme without the proper scheme file being in place, as this has now been done, we can now move forward with something."