

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 29 January 2009

Report of: Safer Cleaner Greener Standing Scrutiny Panel

Subject: Essex County Council – Forest Transport Consultation

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Recommendation:

To note, comment on and endorse the comments (at paragraph 9) of the Safer Cleaner Greener Standing Scrutiny Panel on the document produced by Essex County Council on the Epping Forest Transport Strategy.

Introduction

1. Essex County Council wished to improve the transport network in and around the Forest to help improve the Forest environment. Users would need to be made aware that Epping Forest is a special and unique place, and they hoped to encourage more and more people to consider both sustainable transport alternatives as well as providing a safer and more accessible environment.
2. The Epping Forest Transport Survey contains a series of measures to reduce the impact of traffic and to begin to address the better protection of the Forest landscape. It offers a package of inter-related measures that aims to restore some of the rural character to the roads in and around the Forest and make roads more Forest Centric.
3. The consultation strategy document and the questionnaire were put in the 9 January 2009 edition of the Members Bulletin for information and to enable individual members to respond to the consultation.

Background

4. Epping Forest is owned and managed by 'The City of London Corporation' as The Conservators of Epping Forest. It is London and Essex's largest public open space stretching 13 miles from Manor Park in East London to near Harlow in Essex and covers more than 2,450 hectares (6,000 acres). The parks and the Forest are visited by hundreds of thousands of people each year and provide a unique experience for thousands of school children using its field centres.
5. Epping Forest, large though it is, is fragmented by roads and some of these are amongst the busiest roads in Essex. In the region of 45,000 vehicles pass through the Wake Arms roundabout in the heart of the Forest each weekday, with tens of thousands of vehicles travelling up and down the other roads.
6. The traffic volumes threaten the air quality for people and plants. The speed of traffic can reduce the enjoyment of an outing in the Forest on foot, bicycle or horse, especially with children, due to difficulties crossing busy roads.

7. The Safer Cleaner Greener Scrutiny Standing Panel had been asked to respond to this questionnaire and considered this at a special meeting called just to discuss this topic. The meeting was held on Tuesday, 20 January 2009. Replies had to be in by mid February 2009, so had to come to this meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for endorsement.

Conclusion

9. The Panel came to the following conclusions:

A. Document is local in context and at some point a more strategic overview would be required, to include matters such as:

- (i) review of M11 north facing slip roads at Loughton;
- (ii) re-opening of Ongar – Epping line; and
- (iii) the ability to transport bicycles on the tube at weekends

B. There was general acceptance of the principles behind the strategy in endeavouring to:

- (i) protect the Forest and its environs;
- (ii) improve access to all who wished to enjoy the Forest; and
- (iii) control as far as practical, vehicles and vehicle speeds etc

C. However, the Panel did raise the following issues:

- (i) the Panel was sceptical about the need to reduce speeds on the main roads e.g. Epping New Road, considering that accidents were more likely due to poor driving rather than speed generally;
- (ii) any steps to control traffic should be achieved without the use of “hard” landscaping such as central refuges, street lighting, excessive signage etc;
- (iii) the Panel wished to see the exploration of “softer”, less intrusive controls such as differential road surfaces, road markings to signify the need for lower speed;
- (iv) the Panel were generally supportive of cattle grids provided that they were restricted to main road junctions and that consideration was given to the effects of grids upon other animals in the Forest;
- (v) the Panel was concerned about the introduction of grazing cattle etc and wished to be assured that adequate steps would be taken to keep animals and traffic separated;
- (vi) the Panel were concerned about the introduction of additional crossing points. The Panel recognised the principle of providing more crossings to change the balance between people and cars in the Forest, but were of the view that, for example, on Epping New Road, this was and would likely remain a very busy road, and therefore it was inherently dangerous to encourage further interaction between people and traffic. However, the Panel did consider that existing crossing points should be enhanced to facilitate their use and to make them more obvious to drivers, through for example, raised tables of other “soft” features;
- (vii) the Panel was broadly supportive of proposals to close 2 roads in the district, namely Fairmeads and Wake Road, enabling them to revert to bridleway status; and
- (viii) the Panel had mixed views on the issue of speed cameras, but if their use was introduced, then there was some preference for average speed cameras, since, if sensitively located, these reduce the need for additional street furniture.