Forward Plan reference numbers: FP/AB/706

Report title: Local Growth Fund – Grays South Update Report		
Report to: Accountability Board		
Report author: Mark Bradbury, Interim Director of Place, Thurrock Council and Howard Davies, SELEP Capital Programme Officer		
Meeting date: 12 January 2024	For: Information	
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SELEP Partner Authority affected: Thurrock		

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is for the Accountability Board (the Board) to receive an update on the delivery of the Grays South Local Growth Fund (LGF) project (the Project).
- 1.2. This report provides the Board with an update on the outcome of reviews associated to the Grays South Regeneration Scheme and the subsequent decision taken by Thurrock Council's Cabinet in October 2023.
- 1.3. This report is for information purposes and provides an update on the Project alongside a strategy as to how the Project will be progressed and the next steps it will take.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. The Board is asked to:
 - 2.1.1. **Note** the outcome of the reviews undertaken of the Grays South Regeneration Scheme (which includes the Project)
 - 2.1.2. **Note** that a Project Change Request will be brought to the February 2024 Board meeting.

3. Background

- 3.1. The Project forms part of the Grays South Regeneration Area (GSRA) scheme which consists of a number of interventions designed to support the economic and social vitality of Grays Town Centre. The LGF funding was specifically sought to support the creation of an underpass to replace the existing level crossing and for the creation of a public square at each end, designed to provide active urban spaces suited to a wide range of events, markets and similar activities.
- 3.2. At the time of the original Business Case submission, it was intended that a separate intervention within the GSRA scheme would bring forward new modern commercial/mixed use floorspace and residential units on land at either end of the new underpass. This work was not to be funded through the LGF, but full realisation of the forecast LGF project benefits would not be achieved until this development had been completed.

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- 3.3. The Project is intended to improve public safety, create a fully compliant and unimpeded route under the railway line, improve connectivity between different modes of travel within Grays Town Centre and to deliver high quality public realm. Key benefits of the Project as set out in the original Business Case included:
 - 3.3.1. enabling delivery of 84 homes and 1,279 sqm of retail floorspace by 2025;
 - 3.3.2. supporting commercial development in Grays by creating a more attractive town centre and higher quality commercial space.
- 3.4. The Project has been awarded a total of £10.84m LGF to support delivery of the new underpass and associated public realm. This funding was awarded in two tranches, with the initial £3.7m awarded in February 2019 following submission of an outline Business Case. The second tranche of £7.1m was awarded in November 2019 following submission of a Full Business Case.
- 3.5. In February 2022, the Board received an update on the Project advising that the total project cost estimate had increased from £28.7m (as set out in the Full Business Case) to £37.9m. Under the terms of the SELEP Assurance Framework, an increase in total project cost of this scale (prior to award of construction contract) must be approved by the Board following submission of a revised Value for Money (VfM) calculation. Despite the cost increase, the VfM assessment concluded that the Project continued to offer High value for money, with a revised BCR of 2:1.
- 3.6. The Board was updated in April 2023 on the current position of the Project, the further cost inflation and the reviews being undertaken to assess its viability which are detailed in section 4 of this report. Included within this process, the Project formed part of a full review of Thurrock Council's capital programme. The review was undertaken by Inner Circle Consulting, in conjunction with Thurrock Council and the Government appointed Commissioners (Essex County Council). The Board was advised during both the June and September 2023 meetings that there was insufficient information available at that time to provide an update on the outcome of this review. Thurrock Council is now able to provide an update following decisions that have been made by its Cabinet.
- 3.7. At the meeting in April 2023, the Board agreed to put spend of the remaining LGF funding allocation on hold due to the deliverability and affordability concerns. It was agreed that LGF spend should remain on hold until it could be demonstrated that the Project continued to comply with the requirements of the SELEP Assurance Framework.

4. Project Review Process and Cabinet Decision

4.1. <u>Thurrock Improvement and Recovery Plan</u>

4.1.1. The Improvement and Recovery Plan (IRP) was formulated out of the initial review report produced by Essex County Council acting as Best Value Commissioners. As part of the IRP, Thurrock Council was required to review all of their major capital projects, including those that make up the Regeneration programme. This was with a view to ensuring delivery capacity and financial control and to ensure that robust governance arrangements were in place going forward. This was to enable Thurrock Council to clarify what aspects of the IRP it is going to enable or facilitate, and which major projects the Council will

continue to deliver directly, recognising the financial constraints it is operating under and the need to facilitate more and directly deliver less.

- 4.1.2. In the light of the IRP, it was important to assess whether the Project in its current form was still the right one to pursue or if the current design proposal could be either scaled back or delivered in a different form to achieve similar outputs, outcomes and benefits, whilst reducing further financial exposure to Thurrock Council. Key to this engagement have been discussions with SELEP, Network Rail and c2c on the current design, delivery, and funding options.
- 4.1.3. To support the reassessment, a number of reviews have been completed and the findings arising from these reviews informed the recommendations which were set out in the report which went to Thurrock Council Cabinet on 11 October 2023.

4.2. Inner Circle Strategic Review

- 4.2.1. Inner Circle Consulting's (ICC) review reassessed the current strategic regeneration priorities in Grays Town Centre. Strategic stakeholders were interviewed for their input in reassessing the strategic priorities. These stakeholders included Network Rail; c2c; New River Retail; Morrisons Supermarket; South Essex College; Thurrock Adult Community College (TACC); the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA); Grays Business Partnership; and key community and civic stakeholders.
- 4.2.2. The ICC review concluded that many of the projects that make up the current Grays regeneration programme were not supportive of future growth forecasts. The review findings concluded that projects, especially the Project, were conceived in a different economic climate and assessed against a different appetite for risk, which is not sustainable going forward. The ICC review found that the Project lacked strategic rigour and was not aligned with the development plans of strategic partners; Network Rail and New River Retail. The review concluded that in its current form, the underpass solution was not the right project to pursue as the updated assessment indicated that the Project does not represent value for money for the Council; or deliver the quantum of regeneration benefits required for an investment of this scale. The review recommended ending the underpass project design process and withdrawing the planning application.
- 4.2.3. The ICC review recommended pursuing an alternative strategy focused on a more ambitious Station Quarter. The strategy will involve entering into a strategic partnership with Network Rail and others focused on delivering a new bridge crossing as part of a wider mixed-use development containing a new station, homes and commercial space. This strategy will deliver similar project outcomes but will require less third party land, be less technically challenging and allow risks to be shared equitably between stakeholders.

4.3. Internal Gateway Readiness Review

4.3.1 An internal gateway readiness review has been completed; this type of review is routinely carried out at key decision points in a project's lifecycle to provide assurance that it can progress successfully to the next stage when assessed

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against: Time; Cost; Benefits; and Quality. The gateway readiness review of the Project was undertaken in March 2023 and was assessed with a RED RAG rating. The review found that the initial budget forecasting for the Project was based on preliminary design work and whilst project contingency was included, these were inadequate given the level of change required to accommodate the detailed design.

- 4.3.2 The review highlighted problems associated with the Project's interface with the rail infrastructure, the effect of extensive design changes required for planning, communication between partners and contract delays all affecting the Project. In addition, the expansion of the Project required the purchase of additional land increasing the land acquisition budget to £7.5m. It is acknowledged that there should be more rigorous gateway challenges of the design process to manage the Project budget.
- 4.3.3 The readiness review findings were that the Project should not proceed to the next stage, as the review identified major flaws with the project scope, design, and buildability. To address the significant technical and operational difficulties identified with the underpass design, the readiness review recommended considering design solutions that span over the railway and approach roads, as opposed to technically challenging and costly underpass solutions.

4.4. <u>Network Rail Design & Cost Review</u>

- 4.4.1 The original Project budget of £27.4m was based on concept feasibility designs. Following the development of the design and assessment of the engineering implications, Network Rail produced a detailed cost plan in 2021 which increased the total Project budget to between £34.9m and £37.9m.
- 4.4.2 The design has been further developed during the GRIP4 stage commissioned by Network Rail which reported a further increase in Project budget to £46.1m. The increase was attributed to utility diversions, a longer programme of works, revised construction methodology alongside wider economic inflationary pressures.
- 4.4.3 The original Business Case to support the award of the LGF funding was based on a project cost of £27.4m and produced a BCR of 2.4:1. A revised value for money assessment was undertaken in March 2022, based on the increased forecasted costs of £37.9m which produced a BCR of 2:1. Due to the further Project cost increase there is therefore a real danger that any further value for money assessment would generate a BCR below the required threshold figure of 2:1, thus becoming challenging to continue to justify continuing the underpass proposal further.

4.5. <u>Thurrock Council Cabinet Decision - 11 October 2023</u>

- 4.5.1 The ICC and Internal Gateway Readiness Review findings were presented to Cabinet in October 2023, alongside the increase in construction costs to £46.1m.
- 4.5.2 The project review report highlighted, that in addition to the spiralling forecasted costs and the various issues detailed above, the Council was holding too great a

share of the financial risk of the Project given the current funding imbalance and benefits arising.

- 4.5.3 The Cabinet approved the first recommendation that the current scheme design should not be pursued and that the planning application should be withdrawn. The Cabinet also approved the recommendation to develop a strategic partnership with Network Rail to develop a scheme delivering an over track bridge solution as part of a Station Quarter redevelopment.
- 4.6. The Cabinet decision is to not proceed with the Project as originally envisaged via an underpass solution due to the costs and complexity involved. However, the Project is still critically important to address the significant safety risks posed by the existing crossing and as concluded by the ICC review, the outcomes can be delivered in a different way. The new approach being assessed is to deliver similar project outcomes via a Station Quarter mixed use development to include a bridge crossing which will be delivered in partnership with Network Rail.
- 4.7. The new approach to delivering the Project will be developed for presentation at the February Board meeting. As part of the February Board update, Thurrock Council intend to ask the Board to agree to temporarily transfer the unspent LGF funding awarded to the Project to the Stanford Le Hope/London Gateway project to enable that project to come forward at this time. Equivalent funding will be returned to the Grays South project in the future to allow project delivery.

5. Risk Register, Project Milestones and Project Budget

Table 1: Summary of key project risks

Risk	RAG rating	Progress & Actions
Risk of losing SELEP funding through the change in approach to delivering the project	Red	The revised scheme will be designed to deliver the principle benefit which is to provide a new crossing point over the railway. The wider project benefits originally envisaged will be delivered in a similar way. Whilst some of the professional fees incurred may be abortive due to the change in approach, much of the existing reports, due diligence and land acquisition are beneficial to the new scheme approach.
The need to establish a partnership with Network Rail	Red	The proposed new scheme is more aligned to Network Rail's interest and does not carry the same engineering risks. Initial conversations have been positive and Thurrock Council will be accelerating the partnership negotiations in January 2024.
Project cost and viability	Red	The proposed new scheme approach is simpler from an engineering perspective and does not require the same level of third party land acquisition.
Increased costs or a design review, which might change the scope of the Project, either of which could impact on Value for Money and reduce the benefits expected in the original Business Case. This could risk the LGF allocation being removed from the project	Red	Ensure that the review establishes a way forward that secures similar benefits as well as retaining a High Value for Money assessment.
Public perception due to the change of approach	Red	It is widely accepted that a solution to the crossing needs to be delivered. The Cabinet decision to end the underpass proposals has already been communicated to the public and the new approach is expected to be positively received as it addresses the safety issues. A communications and engagement strategy will be developed to explain the change of approach.

 Table 2: Initial Key project milestones (an updated milestone chart will be set out in the February report)

	Milestone Start Date	Milestone Completion Date	Commentary
Submit revised strategy and agree the next steps with the Board	December 2023	February 2024	Draft report in circulation and positive engagement
Agree the next steps with Network Rail and formalise a memorandum of understanding to incorporate the partnership.	December 2023	April 2024	Initial positive engagement with Network Rail with the revised strategy being more aligned to both parties interests.
Design and Planning	March 2024	March 2026	Current assessment 24 months
Construction	April 2026	September 2028	Current assessment 30 months

Table 3: Project Spend to Date

Funding Source	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	Total Spend to Date	Remaining Budget
	(£m)	(£m)						
Network Rail	0.70	-	-	-	-	-	0.70	TBC
Local Growth Fund	-	3.66	0.83	0.65	-		5.14	5.70
Thurrock Council	0.27	-	-	-	0.47	0.20	0.94	TBC
Total	0.97	3.66	0.83	0.65	0.47	0.20	6.78	TBC

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5.1 The SELEP funding spent to date has been spent on the following areas of work:

Task	Total (£m)
Land acquisition	1.06
Network rail fees	2.28
Legal	1.02
Consultancy fees	0.78
Total	5.14

6. Next Steps

- 6.1. As set out above, the ICC recommendation to pursue an alternate approach to the Project will resolve the clear safety risk of the current crossing and deliver similar funding outcome benefits. The development of a new bridge crossing as part of the Station Quarter regeneration offers significant benefits to residents and the wider regeneration of the Town Centre.
- 6.2. Key to the new approach will be the development of a strategic partnership with Network Rail where clear roles and responsibilities are set out. The first step is to build on existing positive conversations with Network Rail to establish a memorandum of understanding in Q4 2023/2024 for how the scheme will be taken forward. The progress of those negotiations will be reported to the Board in February 2024.
- 6.3. A multi-disciplinary professional team will be appointed to carry out a feasibility stage of the project to examine the art of the possible and to ensure that the approach is viable and in engineering terms deliverable. It is expected that the team will be appointed by June 2024 but other procurement options will be assessed alongside Network Rail to assess if that timescale can be reduced. The team will be appointed with various gateways within the scope to ensure viability and deliverability.
- 6.4. Thurrock Council will bring a Project Change Request to the February Board meeting requesting an extension to the timeline for delivering the Project. The Change Request will also consider the temporary transfer of the remaining unspent LGF funding allocated to the Project to the Stanford Le Hope/London Gateway project. The temporary reallocation of this funding will enable the Stanford le Hope project to come forward in the short-term, whilst further work is undertaken to develop the Project.
- 6.5. The Council remains committed to delivering a Grays South scheme which addresses the urgent pedestrian safety issue and improves connection between the High Street and the river. Within the partnership with Network Rail, the Council will explore options for bringing equivalent funding to the Project from alternative funding bodies and private sector development partners.
- 6.6. At this initial stage of the alternate scheme, there is obviously a risk of future viability challenge. The anticipation is that the overall risk will be mitigated by the simpler engineering solution to deliver the outcomes and the alternate delivery route through Network Rail and a future development partner.
- 6.7. A further update on the Project will be provided at the February 2024 Board meeting, including consideration of the partnership with Network Rail and an update on any funding identified to support delivery/development of the new proposal.

7. SELEP Comments

7.1. At the June 2023 Board meeting it was noted that an update on the Project would be presented to the September 2023 meeting. However, at the September 2023 meeting, the Board were advised that provision of an update on the Project to Thurrock Council Cabinet had been deferred from September until October 2023 and therefore it wasn't possible for an update to be provided.

- 7.2. This report updates the Board on the outcome of the various reviews that have taken place over the last twelve months. It is clear from these reviews that the current project which proposed to deliver an underpass as a safer way of moving pedestrians across the railway line is now considered undeliverable within the confines of the current funding package and the need to deliver Value for Money.
- 7.3. An alternative scheme proposal is set out in this report and there is a clear intention from Thurrock Council to deliver a scheme which achieves similar outcomes to the Project. However, it should be noted that this scheme is still at the feasibility stage with significant further work required to develop the scheme designs, the funding package and to enter into a formal agreement with Network Rail. A further update on the status of the revised scheme proposals will be presented at the February 2024 Board meeting.
- 7.4. In light of the proposed change to the scheme design, it will be necessary for Thurrock Council to demonstrate (to the satisfaction of the Accountable Body) that LGF spend to date can continue to be capitalised and that the spend supports delivery of the revised scheme proposals. If spend to date cannot be applied to the new scheme proposals, this is likely to be considered as abortive revenue spend and will therefore not comply with the grant conditions which require the funding to be spent solely on capital expenditure. It is acknowledged by Thurrock Council within this report that some spend to date may be abortive. If this is confirmed to be the case, the Board may be asked to agree that this funding is returned to the Accountable Body for reallocation to alternative schemes.
- 7.5. Thurrock Council have indicated an intention to seek Board approval in February 2024 for the temporary transfer of the remaining unspent balance of the LGF funding allocated to the Project to the Stanford le Hope/London Gateway project. This transfer of funding would allow the Stanford le Hope project to proceed in the short to medium term whilst further work is undertaken to develop the Project.
- 7.6. The transfer of funding between the projects would be considered as an Option 4 swap (as detailed in the SELEP Assurance Framework) and would require a commitment from Thurrock Council to secure alternative funding of the same value to return to the Project to support delivery at a later date. If Thurrock Council are unable to commit to securing alternative funding to support delivery of the Project, it will not be possible for funding to be transferred between the projects and there is a significant risk that the Project will need to be removed from the LGF programme as, in its current form, it is not deliverable.
- 7.7. It should also be noted that the continued inclusion of the Stanford le Hope/London Gateway project in the LGF programme is dependent upon submission of an updated Business Case which satisfactorily addresses identified deliverability concerns and demonstrates that the project continues to offer High Value for Money given recent cost increases. A revised Business Case has been submitted and is currently being reviewed by the Independent Technical Evaluator with a view to it being presented to the Board in February 2024. Should it be considered that the revised Business Case does not provide the required assurances to the Board, the Stanford le Hope/London Gateway project will be removed from the LGF programme and the temporary transfer of funding to support project delivery will no longer be an option.
- 7.8. Thurrock Council have also indicated that they intend to bring forward a Project Change Request. This Change Request will seek agreement to an extension to the delivery

timetable for the Project and will consider how the temporary reallocation of the unspent LGF funding aligns with the new plans for the Project.

- 7.9. Thurrock Council have indicated that they require more time to develop the Change Request for the Project and therefore it is not presented for Board consideration at this meeting. Given the planned dissolution of SELEP in March 2024, it is critical that the Change Request is brought forward for consideration at the February 2024 Board meeting. This will ensure that there is an agreed position with regard to the Project prior to the transfer of responsibility for the SELEP Capital Programme to the relevant Upper Tier Local Authorities.
- 7.10. The future of the Project and the Stanford le Hope/London Gateway project will both be considered at the February 2024 Board meeting. This is particularly important given the linkages between the projects, and the respective decisions, as outlined above.

8. Financial Implications (Accountable Body comments)

8.1. Essex County Council, as the Accountable Body, is responsible for ensuring that the funding awarded by Government is utilised in accordance with the conditions set for use of the Grant. LGF is a capital grant awarded by Government and is subject to the following condition:

The grant may be used only for the purposes that a capital receipt may be used for, in accordance with regulations made under section 11 of the Local Government Act 2003

- 8.2. This condition requires that the grant is used to fund Capital expenditure; no end date for use of the grant is included within the conditions, however, it was the expectation of Government that it was used to fund the LGF projects and that it would be defrayed in full by the end of March 2020.
- 8.3. There continue to be a number of challenges to completion of the Project, albeit that a significant proportion of the LGF allocation has already been spent supporting delivery; this presents risks to the Board on assuring delivery and realisation of the expected outcomes, particularly given the delay in completion experienced to date. Additionally, the report sets out a further risk of abortive spend, which may mean that the grant conditions set out above are not met and would require a further decision by the Board in respect of this spend, which may include recovery of the funding.
- 8.4. It will be important that the change request that is planned to be brought to the February meeting of the Board provides greater assurance with respect to the plans for delivering the Project to assure retention of the funding against the scheme. Additionally, if a temporary funding swap between this Project and the Stanford Le Hope project is to be requested at the February Board meeting (defined by the SELEP Assurance Framework as an Option 4 funding swap), this will be required to meet the terms of the SELEP Assurance Framework to support this decision.
- 8.5. In addition to the specific challenges outlined in this report, the Board should be aware of wider risks in 2023/24 and beyond which may impact delivery of outcomes due to difficulties experienced by projects as a result of Brexit, COVID-19, economic uncertainty and inflation.

- 8.6. To mitigate these risks, the Board is advised to keep under review the delivery progress of this project and to take this into account with regard to any further funding decisions made.
- 8.7. Essex County Council, as the Accountable Body, is responsible for ensuring that the LGF funding is utilised in accordance with the conditions set out by Government for use of the Grant. Any potential abortive costs will require review by the Accountable Body as they may no longer meet the conditions of the LGF; this assessment should form part of any change request presented for consideration by the Board at the February 2024 meeting.
- 8.8. All LGF in respect of the Project has been transferred to Thurrock Council, as the Project Lead Authority; the funding has been transferred, under the terms of a Service Level Agreement (SLA) which makes clear that funding can only be used in line with the agreed terms. It is also clear that ensuring sufficient funding is secured to support delivery of the Project is the responsibility of Thurrock Council. The Agreements also set out the circumstances under which funding may have to be repaid should it not be utilised in line with the conditions of the grant or in accordance with the Decisions of the Board.

9. Legal Implications (Accountable Body comments)

9.1. The grant funding will be administered in accordance with the terms of the Grant Determination Letter between the Accountable Body and Central Government and required to be used in accordance with the terms of the Service Level Agreements between the Accountable Body and Partner Authorities. If a project fails to proceed in line with the conditions of the SLA or grant conditions from Central Government, the Accountable Body may clawback funding for reallocation by SELEP Ltd.

10. Equality and Diversity Implications

- 10.1. Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 creates the public sector equality duty which requires that when a public sector body makes decisions it must have regard to the need to:
 - 10.1.1. Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act.
 - 10.1.2. Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - 10.1.3. Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.
- 10.2. The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, gender and sexual orientation.
- 10.3. In the course of the development of the project Business Case, the delivery of the Project and the ongoing commitment to equality and diversity, the promoting local authority will ensure that any equality implications are considered as part of their decision making process and where possible identify mitigating factors where an impact against any of the protected characteristics has been identified.

11. List of Appendices

11.1. Appendix A – Grays South - Project Background Information

(Any request for background papers listed here should be made to the person named at the top of the report who will be able to help with any enquiries)

Role	Date
Accountable Body sign off.	
Michael Neumann	09/01/24
(on behalf of Nicole Wood, S151 Officer, Essex County Council)	

Appendix A – LGF Project Background Information

Name of	Grays South				
Project	Thurrock Council				
	Date of Award Amount (£m)				
Local Growth	February 2019	3.7			
Fund (LGF) allocation	November 2019	7.1			
anocation	Total	10.8			
Project Background	The Project forms part of the Grays South Regeneration Area (GSRA) scheme which consists of a number of interventions designed to support the economic and social vitality of Grays Town Centre. The LGF funding was specifically sought to support the creation of an underpass to replace the existing level crossing and for the creation of a public square at each end, designed to provide active urban spaces suited to a wide range of events, markets and similar activities. It should be noted that a separate intervention within the GSRA scheme will bring forward new modern commercial/mixed use floorspace and residential units on land at either end of the new underpass. This work will not be funded through the LGF, but the benefits of the Project will not be fully realised until this development has been completed and is in use.				
Current Planning Applications	Previous planning submissions have been withdrawn as a revised scheme proposal is being developed.				
Delivery Milestones	The Project is currently on hold; however, a high-level delivery programme has been supplied for the revised scheme proposal (set out in the report). This timeline will be revisited and updated as the new proposals are subject to further development.				
Project Costs	Project costs are currently under review.				
Project benefits	 The Project will improve public safety, create a fully compliant and unimpeded route across the railway line, improve connectivity between different modes of travel within Grays Town Centre and will deliver high quality public realm. Key benefits of the Project include: enabling delivery of 84 homes and 1,279 sqm of retail floorspace by 2025; supporting commercial development in Grays by creating a more attractive town centre and higher quality commercial space. The benefits outlined above relate to the original scheme proposal, as set out in the approved LGF Business Case. Whilst 				
	there is a stated intention to achi				

	revised scheme proposals, the exact benefits expected to be
	realised through the Project cannot be confirmed at this time.
Project constraints	 Cost increases. The Project may involve the acquisition of property and land which could extend the project timeline. Planning consent will be required for planned works. The Project is dependent on progression through the GRIP process with Network Rail. Spend of the LGF funding has been placed on hold until it can be confirmed that the Project continues to meet the requirements of the SELEP Assurance Framework. A Project Change request will be presented to the Board in February 2024.
Link to Project webpage	https://www.southeastlep.com/project/grays-south/