

## WEST LINDSEY DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the Meeting of the Challenge and Improve Committee held in the Council Chamber - The Guildhall, Marshall's Yard, Gainsborough, DN21 2NA on 21 February 2017 commencing at 6.30 pm.

**Present:** Councillor Paul Howitt-Cowan (Chairman)  
Councillor Lewis Strange (Vice-Chairman) and Councillor Trevor Young (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Mrs Angela White  
Councillor Stuart Kinch  
Councillor Mrs Pat Mewis  
Councillor David Bond  
Councillor Christopher Darcel  
Councillor Adam Duguid  
Councillor Stuart Curtis

**In Attendance:**

Ian Knowles	Director of Resources and S151 Officer
James O'Shaughnessy	Team Manager BI and Corporate Governance
Amanda Boutell	Employment and Skills Officer
Katie Coughlan	Governance & Civic Officer
Ian Knowles	Director of Resources and S151 Officer
James O'Shaughnessy	Team Manager BI and Corporate Governance
Amanda Boutell	

**Apologies:** Councillor Hugo Marfleet  
Councillor Lesley Rollings

**Also in Attendance:** Mr Graham Metcalfe – DWP  
Mr Richard Waring – Rand Park Farm  
Mr Joshua Waring – Rand Park Farm

**Membership:** It was noted that Councillor Palmer had been appointed substitute for Councillor Hugo Marfleet but had subsequently advised that she was unable to attend.

### 69 CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME AND MINUTE'S SILENCE FOR FORMER MEMBER ALAN CAINE

The Chairman welcomed all those present to the meeting, with a particularly warm welcome extended to guest speakers, representatives from the DWP and Rand Farm.

It was with much sadness, that the Chairman advised, that earlier that day, Members had been made aware of the passing of their former colleague and friend to many, Mr Alan Caine.

Mr Caine had served on the Council for 20 years and had been the District Chairman and Chairman of this Committee previously.

As a mark of respect for their colleague, the Committee joined the Chairman and Officers in a minute's silence.

## **70 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING.**

(a) Meeting of the Challenge and Improvement Committee held on 20 December 2016.

**RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Challenge and Improvement Committee held on 20 December 2016 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

## **71 MEMBERS' DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest made at this point in the meeting.

## **72 MATTERS ARISING SCHEDULE**

The Committee gave consideration to the Matters Arising Schedule, setting out the current position of previously agreed actions, as at 13 February 2017.

**RESOLVED** that the Matters Arising Schedule as at 13 February 2017 be received and noted.

## **73 SCRUTINY OF PUBLIC BODY - DWP**

In connection with the Committee's ongoing theme of Youth Unemployment, the Committee had the opportunity to scrutinise the work of the DWP regarding the support they offered young people in finding employment and the links they had with other partners such as employers, schools and colleges. Mr Graham Metcalf was in attendance to answer the Committee's previously prepared questions, by way of presentation and a period of supplementary questioning.

The questions which had been posed were as follows: -

1. How widespread is the issue of youth unemployment across the District?
2. What are the main contributory factors that cause youth unemployment in our District and what steps does the DWP take to address these?

3. What support does the DWP provide to support young people to actively engage in education/training and how is the effectiveness of any support evaluated?
4. What links does the DWP have to local schools/colleges to promote further education and/or training and what steps are taken to target those at highest risk of failing to take up opportunities?
5. How effective are the links the DWP have with employers in identifying suitable candidates for employment/training/apprenticeship opportunities?
6. Does the DWP assess the 'sustainability of employment' for young people and what are the main causes of young people not securing long-term employment?

The Chairman welcomed Mr Graham Metcalf to the meeting and invited him to make his presentation to Members.

Mr Metcalf provided the Committee with a raft of statistical data and indicators to demonstrate the issue of youth employment in the town of Gainsborough when compared with its comparator group. Currently 23.8% of all claimants fell within the 18-24 age bracket.

Inexperience and a poor state of readiness were considered some of the main contributory factors that caused youth unemployment. In response to this the DWP offered employability training and provision. They had up to 30 local employers offering work experience placements in Retail, Hospitality, Logistics and Business Support. They participated in area reviews, consultations and were active members of the GLEP and Employment and Skills Board. DWP were also undertaking work in the local Academy, engaging young people offering impartial advice on traineeships and apprenticeships.

***Regarding links to schools and colleges and work undertaken to promote further education and/or training, Mr Metcalf advised the college was one of their delivery partners. They offered C.V. Workshops, Presentation Skills and CSR opportunities. A school adviser had been recently appointed to pro-actively engage with young people around Mock Interviews. A partnership approach was deployed in respect of the strategy for NEETS and this was driven through the Employment and Skills Board.***

Ultimately if young people refused to engage, sanctions were applied to any monies they were entitled to.

Members asked a number of questions of Mr Metcalf, in response they were advised that job seekers were expected to commit up to 35 hours per week towards looking for a job. They were required to attend Job Club, they were appointed a mentor making the help offered on a more individual basis and custom fit.

Transport and an increase in agency use were a major hindrance. The DWP did not support agencies who exercised exclusivity clauses.

The Chairman thanked Mr Metcalf for his contribution to the Committee's work.

## **74 SCRUTINY OF PUBLIC BODY - LOCAL EMPLOYERS**

In connection with the Committee's ongoing theme of Youth Unemployment, the Committee had the opportunity to scrutinise the work of a selection of local employers from across the District regarding the employment of young people and barriers experienced. Unfortunately representatives from Eminox had had to withdraw at a very late stage, and apologies were offered to Members for this. However, Mr Richard Waring and Mr Joshua Waring of Rand Farm Park were in attendance to answer the Committee's previously prepared questions, by way of presentation and a period of supplementary questioning.

The questions which had been posed were as follows: -

1. How 'work-ready' do you feel the local youth employment market is? What issues exist and what liaison mechanisms exist for concerns to be raised with local schools/colleges/training providers?
2. What skills gaps exist and how do you think they could/should be addressed?
3. Do any barriers exist which prevent you from offering employment/training/apprenticeships for young people and what could be done to remove any such barriers?
4. What links do you have with schools, colleges, training providers and the DWP to promote employment opportunities or express issues you may have in respect of filling vacancies?
5. What role could the Council play in addressing the issues you face?

The Chairman welcomed Mr Joshua Waring to the meeting and invited him to make his presentation to Members. Mr Waring made the following statement to the Committee: -

Good evening: My name is Joshua Waring and I am here on behalf of Rand Farm Park.

"You've heard from education providers and have now decided to seek the opinion of local employers. We bridge that gap; not only do we employ 55 full and part time staff in various departments across our business, we also provide NVQ level training for up to 72 students per year in conjunction with Lincoln College. Our business is very much education based and attracts students from across West Lindsey and beyond. Further to this, we welcome around 3,000 residential pupils a year to stay on our farm to learn about food, farming and the environment.

During recent recruitment campaigns, we have struggled to fill our skilled positions namely in animal and farm management and our catering department. The applicants, despite having extensive experience often lack the qualifications to back up their practical ability. Perhaps the most concerning issue is the age of these applicants. There are many older candidates who have amassed relevant qualifications during a lengthy career but rarely a clutch of fresh-faced graduates who possess the required qualifications, relevant practical knowledge and the desire to start their career with us. We have even advertised directly in further education centres but still without success.

The obvious question is therefore: were we willing to remunerate applicants sufficiently? Although we never disclose salaries in our adverts, we frequently state

that salary will not be a barrier to the right person and at present, we have employees who are earning up to £30,000 per year - a substantial sum considering the average annual salary in Lincoln is just over £18,000. In addition, we are currently exploring share option schemes and other remuneration packages to reward and retain our most valued employees. We consider ourselves a pleasant place to work and testament to this is the fact that of our 16 full time employees, 9 of them have been with us for over five years and some as long as 17. In addition, many of our full time employees came part time during their school and university careers and have now come back to join us as full time members of the team.

It would appear then that the stumbling block is, as the committee has already determined, the lack of appropriate education in our region. To address initially our agricultural department: we currently employ seven full time equivalent people working with our animals but have struggled to recruit team members with the knowledge and skills to manage this department. Our last campaign saw us advertising for a farm manager; a position that was never properly filled. We do not have arable land but a very diverse range of animals that need specific and attentive care. The distinct lack of knowledge in our applicants was unsurprising as there no longer appears to be adequate provision of a practical large animal care course in the region. There is no local facility that focuses on training students how to care for "traditional farm animals" - the animals, whose commercial rearing brings significant income to the district.

Our catering department makes up for 23% of our overall turnover, feeding approximately 100,000 visitors through our two catering outlets every year. Finding a competent manager for this department has proven exceptionally difficult and again, the applicants were older than perhaps expected. The two that we have previously appointed have had catering experience or management experience but not both.

Another newer arm to our business is childcare. We have been running a holiday club in association with an out of area childcare provider for a couple of years and are building a strong reputation within the community, resulting in up to thirty children per day using our facilities during the school holidays. We are also underway with a new phase of development and have plans to open a nursery for up to ninety children of varying pre-school ages. Again, this area requires the recruitment of skilled individuals to look after the children in our care. This skills shortage is predicted to be a significant challenge when setting up as we know of other childcare businesses recruiting from abroad to fill their positions.

It would appear then that the skills gap is not a specific one but a general lack of vocational expertise. With central government's new scheme to keep students in education until they are eighteen, vocational courses have never been more important. Moreover, through our extensive work with residential groups who come and stay at Rand Farm Park, we have recognised the affinity that less academic students as well as students with additional needs often have with farm animals. From experience, I believe that the investment in the provision of practical agricultural training should be focused on with immediate effect and the provision of catering and childcare education close behind.

Despite the new legislation keeping students in education, society's perception of

vocational learning being second rate is increasingly prevalent. This stigma clearly needs addressing ahead of any investment in the delivery of training.

As more schools become academies, they are often shunning work experience: another program that we believe in whole-heartedly. We welcome students from all over the county for work experience all year round and the benefits to the students are unparalleled. Despite this, we know of several other local businesses who no longer offer work experience as the bureaucracy associated with the program is to them not worth the hassle. With work experience comes many life skills: students are not taught to an adequate level the fundamental skills required when applying for a job. We all too often see poor levels of literacy: CVs and Cover Letters written in "text language" with poor paragraph structure and littered with spelling mistakes: not to mention the substandard interview techniques of some of our applicants. This may not be an issue born of lack of education on offer but by the detachment that students feel between education and the real world. By educating people in a work environment, this dissociation will be refuted. As an organisation, we champion such schemes and Kay/Mum/one of our directors has been interviewing work experience age students at Banovallum School in Horncastle for several years: it is also a service we have offered our current college partner.

Having complained about the lack of education in our region - the reason I was invited here this evening - I would like to offer a solution to this problem that will presumably only worsen as time goes on.

As you have heard, we champion learning and have invested significant time, money and effort in the education and personal development of our region's young people for over twenty years. We have been offering college courses for four years now and as testament to our belief in the cause invested £120,000 in a new classroom for exclusive use by our students four days per week.

As part of next growth project, this year, we have plans to erect a large, purpose built animal barn, which is being designed with education and safe animal contact as the two main considerations. This building will be the ideal location for students to interact with and learn about a wide range of small and large animals.

Rand Farm Park is a very diverse business and so, we have experienced skills gaps in multiple subject areas. The benefit of this diversity is the ability to provide varied training with our in house facilities: we are well equipped to support the education of students in agriculture, catering, tourism and management, childcare and customer service and our strong brand within the district will continue to be an attractive hook for new candidates.

I am appealing therefore to your judgement not only to recognise this gap in skills but I am also offering to you the organisation that I represent. We have extensive facilities not only to educate students of varying ages from within the region but also to put West Lindsey on the map as being a provider of excellent standard teaching in a range of subjects.

Members asked a number of questions of Mr R and Mr J Waring during which they confirmed they currently linked in with Lincoln College as opposed to Riseholme. The academic focus of education was considered to be further impacting on the situation.

Members indicated some sort of compact agreement, may be of assistance as education,

training and employment appeared to be disjointed.

The Chairman thanked Mr R and Mr J Waring for their invaluable contribution to the Committee's work and wished them and their business every success for the future.

Prior to concluding the item, the Director of Resources, outlined a conversation which had been had at briefing, regarding organising a concluding session with Young People, in a more café style forum. The Committee were open to this suggestion and it was indicated that the proposal would be further worked up, looking at a proposed venue, attendees and questions for consideration at the Committee's next meeting.

## **75 PROGRESS AND DELIVERY PERIOD 3**

Members gave consideration to the third of the newly styled Progress and Delivery reports for 2016/17.

The report dealt with the progress and delivery of projects which were aimed at the delivery of the Corporate Plan. This report highlighted those projects that had entered the delivery stage and were either off track or at risk of not delivering. The report also dealt with the progress and delivery of the services the council provided. It was an "exceptions" report and dealt with those services which were either performing above the required level or were below the target set for them. The report further provided Members with a summary of activity across services.

It was noted that the report had previously been considered by both the Prosperous Communities Committee and the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee and Members were provided with the minute arising from each.

The Committee were asked to examine the responses given to the report by the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee and the Prosperous Communities Committee and assure themselves that the appropriate level of challenge was being made by those Committees to the information contained in the report.

No comments were made nor any concerns raised and on that basis it was

**RESOLVED** that having examined the responses given to the report by the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee and the Prosperous Communities Committee, the Committee have assurance that the appropriate level of challenge is being made by those committees to the information contained within the report.

## **76 FORWARD PLAN**

The Director of Resources, as Lead Officer for the Committee, presented a report setting out the items of business due to be considered through the committee system and asked Members to identify any reports that they wished to be brought before the Challenge and Improvement Committee for pre-scrutiny.

No reports were identified.

However, comments were made regarding a recent press announcement to roll out additional services at a number of Lincolnshire hospitals. These did not include Gainsborough's John Coupland. Improved health services were vital if the town was to grow. It was suggested that these comments be fed through to the recently established Health Commission.

**RESOLVED** that:

- (a) the Forward Plan be noted; and
- (b) the Committee's comments detailed above, be brought to the attention of the Health Commission for their consideration.

## **77 COMMITTEE WORKPLAN**

The Work Plan for the business of the Challenge and Improvement Committee was presented.

**RESOLVED** that the Work Plan be noted.

## **78 CLOSING REMARKS**

The Committee placed on record their thanks to Mr Knowles who had been Lead Officer for the Committee over the last few years. Mr Sturgess would be taking on the role going forward.

The meeting concluded at 7.50 pm.

Chairman