

WEST LINDSEY DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the Meeting of the Prosperous Communities Committee held in the
<https://west-lindsey.public-i.tv/core/portal/home> on 2 June 2020 commencing at 6.30 pm.

Present: Councillor Owen Bierley (Chairman)
Councillor Paul Howitt-Cowan (Vice-Chairman) and
Councillor John McNeill (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Stephen Bunney
Councillor Mrs Tracey Coulson
Councillor Christopher Darcel
Councillor Michael Devine
Councillor Mrs Jessie Milne
Councillor Mrs Judy Rainsforth
Councillor Tom Regis
Councillor Jim Snee
Councillor Mrs Mandy Snee
Councillor Robert Waller
Councillor Mrs Anne Welburn
Councillor Trevor Young

In Attendance:

Ian Knowles	Chief Executive
Alan Robinson	Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer
Andy Gray	Housing and Enforcement Manager
Grant White	Enterprising Communities Manager
Ellen King	Senior Performance Officer
Katie Storr	Senior Democratic & Civic Officer
Ele Snow	Democratic and Civic Officer
James Welbourn	Democratic and Civic Officer

Apologies: There were no apologies

Membership: There were no substitutes appointed.

1 CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND REFLECTION FOR COUNCILLOR STRANGE

The Chairman welcomed all those Members and Officers present at the first virtual meeting of the Committee. Before moving on to the formal business for the evening, the Chairman paid tribute to Councillor Strange stating, "Lewis was ever an eloquent and insightful advocate for rural affairs and had a common sense approach and accordingly was an

outstanding ambassador for our part of the world, West Lindsey and Lincolnshire. Such was his stature that many people who did not know him personally certainly knew of him and his many achievements. He will undoubtedly be greatly missed.”

Members were asked to join the Chairman in a minutes’ silent reflection in memory of a dear colleague and friend to many, Lewis Strange.

2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

3 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

(a) Meeting of the Prosperous Communities Committee – 17 March 2020.

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Meeting of the Prosperous Communities Committee held on 17 March 2020 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

4 MATTERS ARISING SCHEDULE

Members gave consideration to the Matters Arising Schedule which set out the current position of all previously agreed actions as at 9 March 2019.

It was noted that all outstanding actions were either marked as completed, or were not yet due for completion.

In respect of the green action entitled “Bird Feeding in the Market Place” the Housing and Enforcement Manager advised that the signs had arrived and had been due to be erected as lock down was announced. Due to Officer re-deployment and additional responsibilities placed on the enforcement team, the signs would be erected over the next few days and weeks along with all the additional signage that would need to be erected in line with social distancing, as non essential shops began to prepare for re-opening.

It was suggested that lockdown had been in place for 11 weeks and these signs had been awaited over a year. Opposition Members considered the Committee should be undertaking greater challenge around the pace of such actions.

Both the Chief Executive and Administration Members spoke in support of the information which had been provided by the Officer, with the latter suggesting the matter was being under represented and simplified.

In response to other questions which arose during discussion of the matters arising but which related primarily to the content of the previous minutes, the Chief Executive advised that he supported the comments made in respect of the need for Officers to complete the climate related issues sections with reports to a greater degree. The Council was expected to approve its initial Climate Strategy in May 2021, and would likely need to make some difficult choices around the degree of priority they placed on “carbon accounting” over financial accounting. Achieving climate change would in certain circumstances would be at a greater

expense and therefore it was vitally important that reports going forward fully reflected the options available, their impact and any mitigating actions in respect of climate change. This was something Members could expect to see changing over the next 6 – 12 month period.

With regard to comments in respect of the Leisure Centres and more frequent smarter targets in respect of wider health impacts, the Chief Executive advised such measures were tracked and reported on in the Corporate Plan Performance Update, annually. They were also available through the State of the District report, again produced annually. Data in respect of wider health benefits was not available more frequently and therefore usage figures and income streams were something around which monthly and quarterly targets could be set. Objectives and outcomes in respect of health and well-being and the Council's impact were reported through Corporate Plan measures.

Regarding cleaning standards, Members were reminded that the Council had planned to put in place a series of secret visitors to obtain user experience feedback. Once it was feasible to establish such visits, the information gained by these visitors would form part of future Performance and Delivery Reports. Cleanliness continued to be discussed with the Operator and remained a priority for the Contract Management Team. Finally, the new Leisure Centre at Market Rasen was on target for completion in June 2020. The Authority was working closely with the operator regarding handover on completion after which time any fit out work would need to be undertaken.

RESOLVED that progress on the Matters Arising Schedule, as set out in the report be received and noted.

5 MEMBERS' DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made.

6 HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY UPDATE

The Housing Assistance Policy was introduced in August 2018, and included discretionary Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) and Private Sector Renewal grants to assist in the reduction of empty homes and improve housing conditions.

It was anticipated that the Lincolnshire Housing Assistance Policy would replace the Discretionary DFG'S element in the future.

Prosperous Communities Committee had requested that a review of the grants be undertaken and reported back to them. The report considered by Members provided information and updates in regards to the grants offered.

The report concluded with a suggested way forward, detailed in Section 5 of the report, which took into account the remaining available funds, the impact of the current grants schemes and objectives of the viable housing solution which was being developed.

Members noted that due to the current Covid-19 pandemic the delivery of all grants had been temporarily suspended, unless there was an immediate high risk of harm that required the works to be completed. Two such DFGs had been completed during this period.

Debate ensued and in response to questions, Officers outlined the difference between the Empty Property Grant and Empty Property Purchase Grant.

In reference to mandatory DFGs an Opposition Councillor expressed disappointment that the lead in time had not been addressed at a county level and considered the District Council should be lobbying harder for change and did not consider the work involved should take that length of time. With regard to the Empty Properties Grant it was suggested that 19 out of 50 was not as successful as it could be and finally the Empty Property purchase grant was considered mathematically difficult to access and it was suggested this was the reason the scheme had not been taken up. Members also sought indication as to what would be the back up position, should the viable housing solution, under consideration, not be taken forward and the grants are withdrawn. Enquiries were also made as to how current staffing resources would be used if the grant work was coming to an end.

In response to the comments around DFG timescales Officers re-iterated comments and the position they had expressed at previous meetings. The average time taken was across all cases, including the most complex. The Authority on receipt of a referral was poised and ready to act. Less complex cases could be dealt with relatively swiftly and Officers indicated they could provide job specific timescales. It was important to strike a balance between getting the job done quickly and addressing the individual's specific needs and the requirements of OTs. Complex cases could require multiple visits. Whilst acknowledging timescales was a key measure, the delivery of DFGs to vulnerable individuals was not just a paper exercise. The Countywide Framework helped offer consistency across contractors and manage costs ensuring the customer could get the maximum benefit.

Regarding the Empty Property Grants, again, some applicants were in receipt of £20,000 plus and therefore completion could be a lengthy time. It was accepted that the scheme had been slow to take off, but Officers were now confident they had a smooth process by which applicants could apply and monies were being spent. Officers re-affirmed the grant had been welcomed and popular with property owners. Regarding the Empty Property Purchase grant, again Officers had spoken previously with the Ward Members about their concerns regarding accessing the scheme, changes had been made in line with these comments. Whilst it was accepted the grant had not proved as popular the reasons for this were disputed.

Finally, Officers outlined how staff resources would be aligned and the work Officers were currently undertaking to ensure that once grant recipients were not required to shield any longer, the work could be resumed at the earliest opportunity.

The Chief Executive confirmed that work was progressing with potential providers for the viable housing solution. The Committee had agreed at a previous meeting to a proposal in principle subject to receiving a detailed business case. All of the concerns raised would be addressed in such a business case and Members would have the opportunity to consider this in detail in a workshop style meeting. Assurance was given that if the business case simply did not stack up then alternative options would need to be investigated and brought back for consideration in due course. The Authority was committed to resolving the empty home issues and developing the community environment within the South West Ward.

It was **RESOLVED** that: -

- (a) the update in regards to delivery and budget spend be noted;
- (b) the proposal that the remaining Private Sector Renewal Grants be completed in line with the current policy, after which time this part of the Policy will be no longer available, be supported; and
- (c) the proposal that no further applications for the grant be accepted until the existing applications are finalised be supported.

7 PROGRESS AND DELIVERY REPORT - PERIOD 4 2019/20

Members considered the Progress and Delivery report for period 4 2019/2020, including the months January to March 2020. This would be the last time the report would come to Prosperous Communities Committee in this format.

The Senior Performance Officer introduced the report and in doing so highlighted that the quarter had been largely unaffected by Covid-19. 78.4% of the performance measures set were being met or exceeded, however it was expected that Covid-19 would impact on some of these areas in the near future. Examples of areas that would be affected included the West Lindsey Leisure Centre, car parking and the Trinity Arts Centre

Members were also asked to note that there had been a second recommendation added to the paper related to 'service updates' and how the Covid-19 pandemic was affecting Council operations.

Councillors thanked Officers for their work and adopting and coping in extraordinary times and continuing to deliver services.

In response to questions regarding the nature and frequency of phone calls being received, and the reasons why 4 of the 9 contracts referenced were not won by local suppliers the Senior Performance Officer undertook to circulate this information outside of the meeting.

Concerns were raised around the cleanliness of the Leisure Centre and assurances were sought that this would be rectified before the centre re-opened. Officers also undertook to include further narrative around the outreach programme and its successes. There were calls from Opposition Councillors to revisit the Gainsborough THI Project including 5 – 7 Market Place. It was suggested that the project was poor value for money, even more so given the financial impact of COVID-19 and should be suspended

In response to several comments and points the Chief Executive addressed the Committee. Specifically in respect of homelessness, the Council did own nine units used for moving on accommodation and therefore the provision suggested by some Councillors already existed and there was no evidence that further stock was needed. With regard to the cinema development the competition to the Trinity Arts Centre had been recognised. It was intended to work with the provider, once they were operating in order to jointly programme the two sites, to ensure they were complementary offers as opposed to competing ones. The programming at the Trinity Arts Centre was already being changed to ensure its income relied less on cinema and more on live acts. The target was to reduce dependency to 25%. The Authority were continuing to tackle empty homes and the intention of the viable housing

solution was for the provider to be in a position to acquire a critical mass of stock in an attempt to influence and disrupt the market forces in the area.

Further questions were asked around capital costs of projects and Officers were asked to clarify why the Council may be subject to increased costs, if contracts were signed and prices agreed. In response, Members noted that this was a cautionary note as there were some projects that were not currently contracted. The Council would work hard to hold contractors to quoted prices. As an aside there had been cases where suppliers were offering discounts to enter into contracts sooner rather than later, for example in the IT field, and therefore it was stressed that non contracted prices could go either way. It was unknown if supply chains would be affected and there was still the ramifications of Brexit to consider.

It was accepted that whilst the increased number of direct debit and card transactions might have an impact on the budget due to increased banking charges, it was questioned whether this would be offset by reduced costs in handling cash payments. Officers undertook to respond outside of the meeting.

In response to the increase in the number of empty homes and the Officer commentary included within the report Officers confirmed how the figure was generated and further gave assurance that they were investigating the data to understand the increase, for example had a new exemption been applied by the Council Tax team. There was no pattern to the spread and it was fairly generic. Further narrative would be included within the next report, once these investigations had been undertaken and the reasons behind the increase could be better understood.

Members enquired as to whether the number of homeless people had increased and whilst there had been a small increase, there had been no rough sleepers, and all those who had presented themselves to Council in need had been found accommodation.

Finally, in response to further comments and questions, the Market Rasen Leisure overspend was still within the overall budget agreed and the final figure would be provided once completed. It was confirmed how costs were to be apportioned going forward. Officers endeavoured to obtain data around the length of time those calls not answered within the standard expected were taking to be answered, where available.

Following much debate and on being put to the vote, it was

RESOLVED to: -

- (a) agree that the performance of the Council's services through agreed performance measures had been assessed. Areas where improvement could be made had been highlighted during the course of debate, whilst having regard to the remedial measures set out in the report; and
- (b) note the updates provided for each of the Council's service areas which detailed how the Covid-19 pandemic was affecting Council operations, and the likely effect on performance over the next 12 months.

8 WEST LINDSEY PARISH CHARTER

Members gave consideration to a report which presented the results from the Parish Charter consultation and which recommended approval of the final version of the Parish Charter document, which was appended to the report.

In response to questions, Officers confirmed the point of contact was a new service, reference to its re-introduction was due to it having been excluded from the first draft. Attendance figures at a previous forum were shared. Officers outlined the challenges in making forums interesting for all, providing them in a location suitable to all and therefore it was hoped by hosting some elements virtually some of these historic challenges may be overcome.

All present acknowledged that the relationship between Parishes and the District needed to be re-framed particularly in respect of the planning service. Officers outlined the Charter was one such way, however, a multi-pronged approach was needed and this included amending the Constitution to support parish referrals in the planning system and hosting a number of training events specifically around the planning system, which had unfortunately been cancelled due to current restrictions. Some Members considered the District Councillor was the lynch-pin between the two organisations and expressed disappointment that this fact was not referenced within the Charter.

The Monitoring Officer acknowledged the work of the District Councillor, however this was not something Ward Councillors could be mandated to be part of. The way Members engaged with local parishes was a personal matter and where this engagement did not happen there needed to be an alternative mechanism. The capability of District Councillors was something that could and would be addressed through the Member Development Group

It was accepted that Parish Councillors were, in the main, volunteers and it was therefore suggested the word training could be perceived negatively. Following some discussion and suggestions it was suggested the Parish Charter be approved subject to any references to training being re-phrased to something more appealing and in-line with the comments made.

On that basis it was **RESOLVED** that:

- (a) the West Lindsey Parish Charter be approved, subject to any references to training being re-phrased to something more appealing and in-line with the comments made; and
- (b) the approach to delivering Parish Forums as detailed within the report be approved.

9 WORKPLAN

Members gave consideration to the Committee Workplan.

In response to comments around the need for flexibility assurance was given the work plan was a fluid document and would allow the ability to accommodate any urgent matters which developed during the recovery and beyond.

The benefits of virtual meetings was raised and it was suggested that these advantages

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should be capitalised upon.

The Chief Executive confirmed an internal Officer recovery group had been established and were tasked with capturing any benefits. Reports would be brought back through the Policy Committees which would resolve to make changes in that regard. A half-year review of the financial strategy was planned for October/ November and this would likely see some changes to workplans.

RESOLVED that the Workplan as set out in the report be received and noted

The meeting concluded at 8.56 pm.

Chairman