

Open Report on behalf of Richard Wills - Executive Director for Environment and Economy

Report to:	Environmental Scrutiny Committee
Date:	04 September 2015
Subject:	Implementing the Natural Environment Strategy

Summary:

This report outlines progress in implementing the Council's Natural Environment Strategy. Current initiatives are presented along with potential future projects and challenges. There are significant opportunities for progress through working with new partnerships, and for promoting co-operation between sectors. Members' views are sought on progress to date and on the overall direction of travel in realising the objectives originally set out in the Council's Strategy.

Actions Required:

To consider and comment on progress achieved in implementing the Council's Natural Environment Strategy, and on the approach being taken to progress implementation for the future.

1. Background

Lincolnshire County Council approved its first Natural Environment Strategy in December 2012. This was part of a broader initiative to provide a coherent strategic framework linking the Council's activities across Environmental Services. The Natural Environment Strategy was set for the period 2012-18. Halfway through that period, and with a new commissioning approach to managing Council business in development, it is now an opportune moment to review progress since the beginning of 2013 and consider potential approaches for implementing the Strategy over 2015-18.

Strategic Outcomes

The Natural Environment Strategy established six strategic objectives to focus the Council's contribution in this area. These are

- Lincolnshire's countryside, coastline and towns are much richer in biodiversity by 2018

- The natural environment is better understood and is valued by residents, visitors and businesses for its intrinsic value and for its contribution to the local and regional economy and the health and amenity of local communities
- Effective promotion of Lincolnshire's natural environment, increases the county's profile as a tourist destination, contributing to increasing visitor numbers and the amount of time they spend within the area
- The natural environment of Lincolnshire is more resilient to climate change, the impacts of which are better understood
- The Council's approach to the natural environment is integrated across its different service areas and with that of its partners and local communities, making the most of existing resources and exploring to the full opportunities for attracting additional external resources and greater joint working between partner organisations.
- Planning policy balances promotion of sustainable growth and economic regeneration with the protection and enhancement of the natural environment. This will be achieved by liaison with Local Planning Authorities and through the Council's Minerals and Waste and Local Transport Planning Policy functions

In order to provide definition around these broad outcomes, the Strategy set out a range of activities that would help to achieve the strategic outcomes. This report summarises progress in delivering the Strategy against these activities.

- 1 *Establish a method of demonstrating the value of Lincolnshire's natural environment to the economy, education, health and well-being of local communities, businesses and visitors to the county.*
- 2 *Provide a clear long-term direction and business case for the Council's involvement and investment in improvement and management of the natural environment. This supports key partner strategies locally and nationally, maximises the resources available locally and brought in externally, and ensures Council resources are used to the greatest effect in combination with those of partners.*

The Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership delivered a strategic outline of these benefits to influence the development of the GLLEP's Strategic Economic Plan early in 2012. In 2013, detailed research findings prepared by LCC officers was submitted to this Committee demonstrating the direct and indirect benefits to local communities, the Council and the county's economy of investment in the natural environment.

This research has been used in planning the Council's response to ongoing budgetary pressures, and is being used currently to support development of the Council's commissioning strategies. Further to this work, the GLNP has now commissioned a comprehensive piece of research to quantify the value of nature

tourism to the Lincolnshire visitor economy overall. It is anticipated that this will strengthen existing and future initiatives by increasing their ability to access European funding streams through the GLLEP. It should be noted, however, that maintaining the high quality environment that supports the tourism offer will require continued investment over and above grant funding. This presents a significant challenge in the current financial climate.

The completion of the Natural Environment Strategy, Climate Local and the Joint Lincolnshire Flood Risk and Drainage Management Strategy, linked through an overarching strategic programme for environmental services has formed the basis of the priorities for these areas that now form part of the Council's suite of Commissioning Strategies. At a strategic level, investment in the natural environment is therefore recognised as an integral part of achieving the objectives of the Council, not least because of its capacity to contribute to key policy areas such as achieving economic growth in the county.

- 3 *Use LCC's resources and responsibilities to achieve a strategic approach to managing the natural environment, (a 'landscape-scale' approach). This means a focus on key strategic sites and areas, respecting international, national and local protection. It also makes best use of the opportunities provided by existing landscape and historic landscape character areas and assessments, and maximises community and economic benefit.*
- 4 *Support initiatives that add to the biodiversity and amenity value of existing areas and sites by creating links between them or extending them where appropriate.*

The Council continues to support a number of long-standing landscape-scale initiatives, such as the Lincolnshire Wolds AONB, the Lincolnshire Grazing Marshes project (which is ongoing following completion of the funded element) and the Coastal Country Park, and since 2014 has helped to facilitate further projects that build on this approach to build on existing strengths and promote a more joined-up approach.

Developing the Wild Coast programme is a key element in this. The Council is working closely with a range of partners to link significant sites and areas along the coast, opening up a more varied and enjoyable visitor experience from Donna Nook in the north, through the Coastal Country Park to Gibraltar Point and Frieston Shore.

The Council's current capacity to draw down external funds has greatly assisted with the winning of Coastal Community Funds to promote visitor access in the north of the coastal area. Additional funds have been made available on the basis of the Council's financial and in-kind support for progressing the coastal observatory at Chapel Point and the reinstatement of the Gibraltar Point visitor centre following the damage incurred during the coastal surge of December 2013.

- 5 *Promote use of ecological expertise and best available evidence, to support policy, decision-making and monitoring of Council services, particularly the Lincolnshire Biodiversity Action Plan, The Lincolnshire Local Wildlife Site*

System and the Lincolnshire Environmental Records Centre which are endorsed and managed through the Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership.

- 6 *Identify opportunities for initiatives to improve the quality and functioning of ecosystem services. This will include joint working between service areas and partner organisations through green infrastructure, historic environment and protected landscape projects.*

The Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnerships hosts the Lincolnshire Environmental Records Centre, a major resource of environmental data used for planning purposes, development and a range of other bespoke projects. The Record Centre's funding model is self-supporting in the sense that it is based on service provision rather than grants. However, services are provided at cost on a not-for-profit basis, and are clearly vulnerable to pressures on spending for its services.

As the only provider of these data services in the county, the Records Centre supports high quality decision making, with the corresponding challenge that lower take-up of its services risks less well informed decision-making and slower processes, impacting on the pace of economic growth. Equally, as the Records Centre develops its data holdings it is able to offer an increasingly comprehensive service, and this has underpinned partnership research initiatives in support of the GLLEP, as well as for individual partner organisations.

An example of this is the provision of data to assist in the development of proposals for managing and improving green infrastructure networks in Local Planning Authorities' emerging Local Plans. Council officers have played an active role in working with planning colleagues to develop comprehensive proposals for networks of green infrastructure to promote increased linkage between sites and improved access to a high quality environment for all.

A principal example of this includes the Central Lincolnshire Local Plan, although the influence of promoting walking and access routes in the AONB and the Coastal Country Park area can also be seen in East Lindsey's emerging draft Local Plan. Equally, the county's Minerals and Waste Plan has benefitted from substantial input from the Lincolnshire Geodiversity Action Plan.

- 7 *Strengthen strategic partnership working with individual partner organisations and support the successful development of the newly-established Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership.*
- 8 *Develop a consistent approach to working with local communities, businesses, landowners, farmers and voluntary organisations, helping local communities manage and promote their own environmental assets and providing partner organisations with clarity about the Council's priorities for, and commitment to, the natural environment.*

The County Council works closely with individual partner organisation, such as the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, which manages important sites on LCC's behalf, notably Council-owned assets such as Gibraltar Point and Snipe Dales Nature Reserve.

This extends to extensive co-operation on strategic programmes including the Coastal Country park and now the Wild Coast initiative.

The Council has also actively supported the development of the Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership since its foundation in 2012, contributing a vice-chairman, facilitating links with the GLLEP, and ensuring that partners' work programmes are well-aligned.

Improved alignment of programmes has enabled a more consistent approach between partners towards engaging with people benefitting from Lincolnshire's environment, ranging from the annual Wolds Walking Festival, through the bespoke consultation exercises undertaken to develop the Wild Coast initiative, to the ongoing activities of local volunteers managing the county's local sites system, including well-used sites such as South Thoresby Warren and Cross O'Cliff Orchard, among others.

Recruitment and training of local volunteers has been a particularly important aspect of the Chalk Streams project, where a successful bid for £250,000 WREN funding over three years has enabled a significant expansion of the volunteer programme, encouraging more people to understand and contribute to the management of this rare habitat. It will be appreciated that maintaining this programme will depend upon sustaining efforts to continue seeking external grant funding.

9 *Develop a programme of educational activities to inform and involve young people and the wider community.*

The extension of the Chalk Streams project mentioned above has enabled a substantial programme of engagement with schools in the local area to be developed and implemented, within a broader framework of educational objectives established in the Lincolnshire Wolds AONB Management Plan.

Such levels of engagement and public involvement will be an important factor in the development of the Wild Coast and the South Lincolnshire Fens programmes, while an ongoing programme of events is being maintained in the Lincolnshire Limewoods following successful completion of the original five-year project to publicise and enhance this area.

It should be recognised that sustaining this activity is dependent on continuing to secure new grant funding in the future, and on maintaining sufficient resource to identify and pursue appropriate funding opportunities.

10 *Ensure that access for all is maintained and enhanced by existing and new environmental initiatives.*

It will be noted that ensuring access for all is a key component of the initiatives mentioned above. It is a guiding principle in the Council's Natural Environment Strategy, and is supported by our partners and the partnerships to which the Council contributes. As a significant contributor to health and social amenity,

maintaining and promoting access will continue to be a priority in the initiatives supported by the Council.

New and emerging initiatives

A number of emerging initiatives have been mentioned throughout this report.

In the coastal areas of the county the Wild Coast represents the principal strategic initiative, seeking to draw together the benefits of existing sites and programmes into a comprehensive visitor experience within the broad framework of the GLLEP's ambitions for sustaining and growing coastal communities and the coastal economy. A feasibility report setting out proposals for progressing the initiative has recently been completed, and it is anticipated that the Wild Coast will be a significant strategic focus for the Council and its partners during 2015-17.

In supporting the Greater Lincolnshire Nature Partnership, the Council has opportunities to develop its commissioning approach through facilitating bespoke research to inform and promote a co-ordinated approach to the environment as an important factor in enabling economic growth in the county.

In the near future the Wolds AONB Management, for which the Council shares statutory responsibility with East Lindsey District, West Lindsey District and North East Lincolnshire Councils, will require review and renewal in 2017-18, while there is also an opportunity to review and refine activities commissioned directly from our partners on our behalf.

2. Conclusion

Challenges – and how to meet them

It is undeniable that there will be significant challenges in the near future, not least because of ongoing – and increasing – pressure on public finances.

It will have been noted that a theme running through all of the initiatives and partnership arrangements outlined above is that of improving co-ordination and more efficient use of resources between partner organisations.

While improved access to European funding streams through the GLLEP may offer some assistance, the only way in which effective contribution to the environmental sector will be maintained is by increased facilitation of resources available through other partners, and a greater focus on sharing resources in kind, as well as financial.

As the Council moves to a commissioning model of service provision it is likely that co-ordination and facilitation activities will become prevalent over direct delivery in the way in which it deploys its resources. In this respect a key challenge is widening recognition of the environment as a fundamental area underpinning the tourism economy, health, well-being and place-making in the interest of supporting and creating employment. Central to this will be increasing recognition that the

initial investment in such services is small compared to potential longer term costs incurred through poor health, lower employment and antisocial behaviour.

Members' views are sought on the range and scope of new and emerging initiatives for the next few years as vehicles for delivering the Council's Natural Environment Strategy up to 2018

3. Consultation

a) Policy Proofing Actions Required

n/a

4. Background Papers

The following background papers as defined in the Local Government Act 1972 were relied upon in the writing of this report.

Document title	Where the document can be viewed
Lincolnshire County Council Natural Environment Strategy	www.lincolnshire.gov.uk

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