



**ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE
30 MAY 2023**

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR I D CARRINGTON (CHAIRMAN)

Councillors M A Griggs (Vice-Chairman), Mrs A M Austin, A J Baxter, H Spratt, G J Taylor, L Wootten and R Wootten

Councillors M Clarke and T Dyer also attended the meeting

Officers in attendance:-

Justin Brown (Assistant Director Growth), Kiara Chatziioannou (Scrutiny Officer), Mick King (Head of Economic Infrastructure), Marianne Marshall (Communications) (Strategic Communications Lead), Chris Miller (Head of Environment), Vanessa Strange (Head of Infrastructure Investment), Jess Wosser-Yates (Democratic Services Officer) and Simon Wright (Regeneration and Portfolio Manager)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/REPLACEMENT MEMBERS

It was reported that under Regulation 13 of the Local Government Committee and Political Groups Regulation 1990, Councillor P Skinner was replacing Councillor I Fleetwood for this meeting only.

2 DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

There were no declarations made at this point in proceedings.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 11 APRIL 2023

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 21 April 2023 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

4 ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE CHAIRMAN, EXECUTIVE COUNCILLORS AND LEAD OFFICERS

Councillor T Dyer, Support Councillor for Economic Development, Environment and Planning, encouraged members to use public rights of way in their community and provide feedback on their quality to the Countryside Team's improvement plan. The deadline to submit comments was 9 June 2023.

5 SCRUTINY PANEL B - AGRICULTURE SECTOR SUPPORTS IN LINCOLNSHIRE SCRUTINY REVIEW

The Committee considered the Agriculture Sector Supports in Lincolnshire Scrutiny report which was developed by Scrutiny Panel B (SPB). Kiara Chatziioannou, Scrutiny Officer, introduced the report and Councillor G Taylor, Chairman of SPB, summarised its key findings and recommendations. Councillor Mike Clarke, Vice-Chairman of SP, Vanessa Strange – Head of Infrastructure Investment, and Justin Brown, Assistant Director – Place were also in attendance for this item. The following matters were reported:

- SPB examined the agricultural sector and analysed skills, practices and challenges experienced in farming communities across Lincolnshire, and sought to verify whether contemporary practices were encouraging farming communities to adhere to the Lincolnshire Green Masterplan.
- The Panel also aimed to identify potential opportunities for LCC to assist with unmet needs of farmers and agricultural workers, and to propose subsequent interventions.
- Several recommendations were identified by the Panel and were corroborated by industry experts, organisations and businesses.
- As part of its remit, SPB identified and analysed challenges experienced by the agricultural sector which included Avian Influenza outbreaks, changes to government policy, labour shortages, training provision, increased automation, and poor mental health.
- Members were requested to provide feedback and comment on the recommendations outlined in the report; this feedback would be reported to the Executive for their consideration on 4 July 2023.

During consideration of the report, the following comments were highlighted:

- The Committee welcomed that the mental health of farmers held a central position within the report.
- Members stressed the importance of balancing migration concerns whilst acknowledging the necessity of seasonal labour, which often required on a foreign workforce population. The Head of Infrastructure Investment further noted the value of developing skills locally to reduce dependence on seasonal labour.
- Substantial investment was made to the Bishop Burton Showground campus, Riseholme University of Lincoln campus, and Barclays Eagle Lab to stimulate local skills infrastructure and recruitment in manual farming work.
- There was a potential opportunity to innovate some County Farms to support young farmers to secure tenancies.
- Sessions were held with colleagues within Trading Standards, and it was noted that no concerns were raised regarding skills and expertise.
- The reinstatement of the Champion Farmed Environment Scheme focused on accommodating transitions caused by the Agriculture Bill and various environmental schemes.
- The Committee accepted there were local and manufacturing farming opportunities, however retention of the overall farming workforce could improve in Lincolnshire.

Subsequently, the Chairman requested that LCC worked with the University of Lincoln to emphasise the range of agricultural careers available to students.

- Ill soil health was an issue for farmers and was a topic included within the action plan; the Chairman requested this topic was included in the recommendations passed to the Executive.
- Members suggested that improved rural broadband could help support rural connectivity and combat feelings of isolation; the Head of Infrastructure Investment further highlighted that businesses also had noted the need for better technology, particularly 5G, drone technology and robot weeders.
- The Lincolnshire Partnership NHS Trust (LFPT) supported farmers struggling with mental health, and third sector organisations worked with agricultural workers directly such as the Lincolnshire Rural Support Network (LRSN) which had funding for a mental health nurse within their team.
- Some members welcomed that the report included an assessment on the impact of Britain leaving the European Union.
- The Head of Infrastructure Investment agreed to circulate information on how the new migration routes outlined in the report would affect the availability of labour in Lincolnshire.
- Given the amount of agricultural technological innovation in Lincolnshire, it was suggested that LCC could work with the University of Lincoln to introduce a specialised course in agricultural engineering and manufacturing.
- It was questioned whether agricultural waste could be better utilised in Lincolnshire as out of 32 anaerobic digestion sites, only two provided biomethane to the national grid. The Head of Infrastructure Investment expressed that LCC was undertaking work regarding energy efficiency, such as the Energy Options Analysis report which was currently being developed.
- Members questioned whether officers were confident that smaller individual farming enterprises could sufficiently access capital to technologically modernise. The Head of Infrastructure Investment accepted that accessing capital was a significant challenge for farmers; despite there being new funding opportunities, businesses had to initially pay for capital investment and claim it back in arrears. It was assured that advice from land agents and agricultural consultants was available, and shared learning with other farmers was encouraged. Further, LRSN and various land agents had taken on contracts from DEFRA to offer individual advice services around succession farming.
- It was questioned whether officers were satisfied with coordination from agencies in supporting individual farming enterprises. The Head of Economic Infrastructure informed that SPB found that many bodies were attempting to coordinate multiple agencies, therefore LCC adopting a similar role was seen as unnecessary and could cause a proliferation of information. It was further noted that there were many remote sources and webinars available to support individual farming enterprises, and the Growth Hub sought to link farmers together.
- Members questioned how agricultural space was being maximised within Lincolnshire; it was noted the report discussed biodiversity net gain and using land for energy, and approaches such as vertical farming were briefly discussed by the Panel. It was

further noted that in some cases, crops were being grown by using surplus heat generated by farming.

- The Panel had found that more land was being used for solar panels, and that there were significant number of applications being submitted.
- Relevant to page 64 of the report [Table 1: Lincolnshire County Council Area Food Chain Employment (2021)], it was explained that the “10 employed in fishing an aquaculture” reflected on individuals who ran fish farms where more individuals were being employed.

RESOLVED

1. That the Committee receive and endorse the Scrutiny Panel report.
2. That the Committee supports the recommendations to the Executive as set out on page 15 of the report.
3. That any comments recorded be passed on to the Executive ahead of their consideration of the item on 4 July 2023/

6 LCC BUSINESS CENTRES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO - PERFORMANCE REPORT

Consideration was given to a report by Simon Wright, Regeneration and Portfolio Manager – Economic Infrastructure, which updated the Committee on the performance of the Council’s portfolio of business centres and industrial units including occupancy levels and tenant feedback on the suitability of the Council’s premises to support the needs of small businesses. The following matters were reported;

- The Council aimed to provide business space for small and start up businesses in situations where development viability meant that the private sector was unable to provide this space. Furthermore, by offering flexible lease terms the council was able to support the economic growth of Lincolnshire.
- The report was the result of ongoing and direct engagement with tenants. This process had included structured interviews and open questioning on the areas of accommodation, management, support that was offered and what further could be done.
- Occupancy levels were considered as being good overall; variation was observed between industrial units and business centres.
- A major refurbishment of the Eventus Business Centre in Market Deeping had created an additional 2,365 sq ft of lettable space.

During consideration of the report, the following comments were noted:

- Local government continued to maintain an important role in supporting the private sector; such interventions provided an opportunity for LCC to stimulate greater economic growth locally.
- The Regeneration and Portfolio Manager – Economic Infrastructure informed the Committee that the Covid-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst in helping bigger businesses move on from LCC premises.

- PA number of tenants also requested further support in encouraging networking and businesses to business events and similar promotional activities.
- Business centres had an occupancy rate of 75.5%, and it was noted that there were different general occupancy levels between industrial premises and business centres. The Regeneration and Portfolio Manager – Economic Infrastructure informed members that occupancy was measured by the total lettable area, not by the number of businesses that were supported, and therefore reflected the recent completion of the Eventus reconfiguration and The Hub in Holbeach where there were still a number of vacant offices which were being actively marketed.

RESOLVED

1. That the report be endorsed; and
3. That the Committee's satisfaction be recorded on activity undertaken in engaging with tenants.
4. That comments and suggestions made in relation to the overview of activity discussed are taken under consideration by the relevant Officers and the Executive Portfolio Holder.

7 ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to a report by Kiara Chatziioannou, Scrutiny Officer, which invited the Committee to consider and comment on the content of its own work programme for the year to ensure that scrutiny activity was focused where it can be of greatest benefit.

Clarification was made that October's meeting was scheduled for 24 October rather than 23 October 2023 as per the Work Programme; this was due to a mistake to be rectified by the Scrutiny Officer following the meeting.

RESOLVED

That the proposed work programme be approved, subject to the amendment above.

The meeting closed at 11.40 am

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