

Leader's statement

Annual General Meeting
18 May 2012



Martin Hill

Cllr Martin Hill OBE Council Leader

Introduction

When the history books for 2012 are written, they will record two very special events.

Firstly, they will recall the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, when our nation came together in celebration of her extraordinary 60 years on the throne.

Secondly, they will remember the London 2012 Olympics, when billions of people across the world admired not just great sporting achievements, but also the friendliness and organisational skills of the host country.

But what about the UK economy? How will that be seen? At this stage, it is hard to predict when a sustained recovery will start, although both business indicators and confidence in Lincolnshire are high.

What is beyond doubt is how much has been achieved in creating the right underlying conditions for growth since the Conservative-led Government took office.

In May 2010, the Coalition confronted a huge hole in the national finances – the result of years of overspending by the previous Labour administration, combined with the cost of bank bail-outs.

Faced with such a toxic legacy, the Government acted quickly to tackle the spiralling annual deficit. We had to begin living within our means, not racking up more debt for future generations.

That has meant difficult choices, and the last two years have not been easy. However, they have been vitally important as the first steps in getting Britain back on track.

So what has all this meant for Lincolnshire County Council? As members know, we have to find savings of £125m over four years – a huge challenge, but one this authority is determined to meet.

We are now starting the second of those four years, an ideal opportunity to consider what has been achieved and what remains to be done. As I make that assessment, I find real cause for cautious optimism.

The key step in our approach was identifying our "core offer" – the services this council is committed to providing, with particular emphasis on public safety. They have been given top priority in our last two budgets, which also helped hard-pressed residents by freezing our council tax at the 2010/11 level.

Besides defining the core offer, we were the first large council to invite a peer review from the Local Government Association. It was extremely positive about our progress, praising our services, governance, financial planning and leadership, and confirmed we were on the right road.

Last year, we also redefined the council's vision and purpose to ensure we focus clearly on what we are all about – value for money, investment for the future, strong communities and partnership working.

Beyond the core offer, other services have inevitably had to be looked at afresh. Should they still be provided? Or does it make sense, in the current financial climate, to reduce them, stop them altogether or provide them in a different way?

In making these difficult decisions, this council has adopted an entirely pragmatic approach – flexible, considered and in the long-term interests of residents – rather than a “one-size-fits-all” solution.

For example, we have not continued providing every single service and protecting every job, as some councils have done. Similarly, we have not scaled back so radically that we have become just a commissioning body, the route favoured by one or two others.

Instead, we always look at how best to achieve good, value-for-money services for the people of Lincolnshire, however they are provided. It is about achieving the right balance for service users and taxpayers. It is about common sense.

It is also about supporting local people to get involved with services – for example, community groups keen to run extra sessions at youth clubs. Volunteering at our libraries and heritage sites has also never been greater. This is the Big Society at its best, improving services for local people, and we are 100% behind it.

In some cases, of course, service changes have resulted in job losses, mostly achieved through voluntary redundancy. To staff who have left, thank you for your dedicated service. It has not gone unnoticed. To employees still with the authority, we can look to the future with shared confidence, knowing our toughest decisions probably lie behind us.

Together, we have created an authority better prepared for the challenges ahead than we could have dared to hope two years ago. We are also well on the way to successfully transforming the way local services are delivered, alongside our partners in the public, voluntary and third sectors.

On that note, I know you will join me in welcoming our Public Health colleagues to the authority in readiness for the formal transfer of their responsibilities from the NHS on 1 April 2013.

As we look forward to the coming year, including the Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics, let us also look back with satisfaction on many outstanding service achievements over the last 12 months. It is a record we can all take pride in – both elected members and officers – as servants of the people of Lincolnshire.

Balancing the books

As I have said, the council's finances remain strong, despite a challenging economic environment.

The first year of our four-year budget plan, designed to maintain core services despite a necessary reduction in central government grants, has been delivered successfully. We even achieved a one-off underspend through the consolidation of savings.

On council tax, we accepted a second government freeze grant to again keep our rate at its 2010/11 level. As members know, the one-off nature of the funding will cause financial pressure in the future, but prudent budgeting has already partly offset that.

The 2012/13 budget also set out an ambitious capital programme for the next few years, with six major infrastructure projects – the Lincoln Eastern Bypass, an East-West Link in the city centre, relief roads for Grantham and Spalding, the roll-out of superfast broadband across the county, and the Teal Park business development in North Hykeham.

Looking ahead to April 2013, funding for local authorities will change significantly when the formula grant is replaced by a system based on the local retention of business rates. New arrangements for the payment of council tax benefit will also impact on this authority. We have prepared for these pressures with a £3.5m financial reserve, and will work closely with district council colleagues as the changes take effect.

Encouraging economic prosperity

The Lincolnshire economy has fared better than many areas and business optimism is high. This is due in part to the strong performance of our traditional industries, such as agri-food and tourism, and our sound manufacturing base.

Businesses are again starting to invest, both in physical assets and staff, and the steady upward trend in the county is expected to continue. We are supporting this in a number of important ways:

- We are active participants in the Greater Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnership, which brings together the private and public sectors to set economic development priorities, lobby for investment and co-ordinate national growth funding in the area.
- We remain committed to initiatives that attract external funding and boost private sector growth. Last year, we helped about 800 businesses by encouraging innovation, including green technologies.

- To help businesses struggling to find finance or good quality advice, we now meet regularly with the county's leading business banks. We have also set up the www.businesslincolnshire.com website, with information about sources of useful advice, events and initiatives.
- We run European Social Fund training programmes to support businesses in building up their skills base – one of the few county councils to do so. Last year, our programmes provided basic skills training to 160 people and supervisory/management skills to 168.
- We run Rural Development Programme schemes, providing £6m for rural businesses and communities, and have now been awarded a further £142,000 to put towards this important work.

This council is also determined to facilitate further investment through major development schemes and regeneration projects, including:

- We have an approved plan and national and local public sector funding in place (£28m) for superfast broadband. That will secure at least the same level of investment from the private sector, ensuring availability to at least 90% of county properties by 2015. The remainder will enjoy standard broadband, with efforts continuing to upgrade them further.
- At Teal Park in North Hykeham, a new high-quality, mixed-use business area is being created, with Siemens expected to take occupation in September.
- In Grantham, there has been continued progress on the Growth Programme, with the Market Place refurbishments complete and preparation for more public realm improvements underway. We also have planning permission for the Station Approach redevelopment and are consulting on the South East Quadrant urban extension.
- In Boston, we have agreed our £11m contribution to the Boston barrier, which will bring major regeneration benefits to the town.

Keeping Lincolnshire moving

Our highways network and transport are crucial to the county's economy and provide the means for residents and visitors to go about their busy lives.

We want our roads to be safe, too, so despite facing difficult decisions in the council's overall budget, we have again given this area a high priority.

Out on the roads, the performance of our gritting teams remains exceptional, and we routinely treat 34% of our very large road network, exceeding the government guideline figure. In total, we cover 1,869 miles (all the main routes) out of the 5,567 across the county.

We must also thank our highways department and their Alliance partners for ensuring we had sufficient salt stocks ahead of last winter. Our storage capacity now stands at 35,000 tonnes, and we have improved our severe weather mutual aid arrangements with district and parish councils.

Remaining with weather issues, we have unfortunately suffered significant drought damage this year to roads and footpaths across low-lying parts of the county. We have, in partnership with adjacent authorities, bid for additional support from the Department for Transport to help with extensive repairs.

Tragically, there were 47 fatalities on Lincolnshire's roads during 2011 – two more than the previous year, but still well below the annual average of 79.4 for the decade from 2000 to 2010. While we have seen a considerable reduction in those killed or seriously injured in recent years, we will continue to work with our partners to maintain that vital downward trend.

Turning now to significant capital projects that will assist economic regeneration and improve access and movement:

- I am pleased to announce that, in response to our “best and final bid”, the Government has confirmed “Programme Entry” status for Lincoln Eastern Bypass, allocating nearly £50m towards the £98m estimated cost. We hope to start construction as early as 2014.
- A planning application has been submitted for the East-West Link in Lincoln, which will ensure improved transport movement across the city, as well as economic benefits.
- We are working with South Kesteven District Council on the Grantham south west relief road. This will be linked to new housing, and two routes have been put forward for consultation. Although most funding should ultimately be provided by the housing developer, the council has approved £30m to ensure the earliest possible start.
- Much of the Boston Transport Strategy has now been delivered within programme and budget. With the improvements to the Market Place also substantially complete, this should provide a much-improved environment for residents and visitors.
- A route has been announced to protect the line for the future delivery of Phase II of the Western Relief Road for Spalding, allowing for sustainable development of the town into the future. We are looking to submit a planning application later this year. Funding is developer-led.

We have also addressed other important transport issues:

- Discussions are continuing with Network Rail and other partners to resolve the issues associated with level crossings in Lincoln city centre and across the county.

- We have submitted our application to the Government to take on parking enforcement, following agreement with all seven district councils. It is likely to go live this autumn, reducing congestion, improving safety and maximising the use of time-limited parking.
- In 2013 the Department for Transport will be letting the new East Coast Main Line rail franchise. We have submitted a business case for improving rail links between Lincoln and London and are helping Nottinghamshire authorities to improve Lincoln-Nottingham links.
- We have successfully managed the transfer of concessionary fares from the seven district councils. We have agreed with bus operators the reimbursement rate for concessionary pass holders, ensuring passes can continue to be used for journeys before 9.30am.
- We have also reached financial agreement with Northamptonshire County Council for us to deliver the booking system for its new Demand Responsive Transport scheme, based upon Call Connect.

Promoting culture and tourism

As a council, we are committed to improving the visitor economy, and investing in our heritage assets will help achieve this aim, as well as providing more leisure opportunities for residents. Visitor numbers to our sites have increased this year, while other highlights include:

- At Lincoln Castle, we were delighted to announce in March that we had secured £12m from the Heritage Lottery Fund to create an enhanced visitor attraction ready for Magna Carta's 800th anniversary in 2015. This is one of the largest grants awarded, reflecting this council's vision for tourism generally and for this specific project.
- Elsewhere in Lincoln, visitors to The Collection can enjoy a new play area and revamped café, run by Stokes of Lincoln. Investment in climate-control equipment has also been put in place in the Archives to protect the valuable records.
- Gainsborough Old Hall re-opened to the public in April. Improvements include a new visitor route, a hand-held electronic guide, access to rooms not previously open to the public, a new shop and café, and newly conserved wall paintings.
- The Museum of Lincolnshire Life will undergo improvements over the next 12 months to the reception, gift shop and courtyard. There will also be a new outdoor play area, while the storage section will be opened for the first time. Council match-funding of £200,000 attracted £335,000 from Arts Council England's Renaissance Programme.

Moving on to libraries, and following the successful Caistor scheme, new arrangements are being developed, extending opening hours and access to services. The most recent is the new Sutton Bridge Library, with the Curlew Centre site run by volunteers and supported by us with stock and advice. Discussions about new community book deposits are now taking place at Heckington, Holton le Clay, Chapel St Leonards, North Somercotes, and Irby and Bratoft.

Technology investment has also been strong in heritage and libraries. As a result, customer interactions with the Lincs to the Past website have exceeded all targets, while the introduction of e-books has created a growing number of users in a short space of time.

Caring for the environment

How we care for our environment and manage our waste will be one of the ways future generations will judge us.

As Lead Local Flood Authority, we are developing a Joint Local Flood Risk Management Strategy with our partners, and have been successful in £500,000 capital bids through the Flood Defence Grant in Aid Scheme.

We are also seeking agreement with Internal Drainage Boards to carry out work outside their areas on our behalf. This is possible due to the strength of our Flood Risk and Drainage Management Partnership.

Recent achievements of the Environmental Management Service include:

- We continue to set new standards of best practice, being nationally recognised for partnership working, the Coastal Study, Coastal Pathfinder and surface water flood risk assessment.
- Partnerships led or supported by the council continue to protect, enhance and promote our natural environment. These include the Lincolnshire Limewoods, Coastal Country Park, Coastal Grazing Marshes, Trent Vale Landscape Partnership and Wolds AONB.
- The Limewoods Project has been completed this year, with over 23,000 people participating and £320,000-worth of volunteer time recorded on conservation, heritage, education and recreation projects.
- The council continues to tackle the causes and effects of climate change. We are installing automatic metering in all our buildings and schools, enabling us to target investment in the worst-performing buildings. To date, we have invested nearly £1m in energy efficiency, reducing bills by £350,000 per year.

- Over the last 18 months, the Home Energy Lincs Partnership has helped about 11,500 Lincolnshire households with 14,000 insulation measures. These have saved householders an estimated £1.8m on energy bills.

Lincolnshire and this council also recorded notable waste management successes last year:

- Work is progressing well on the Energy from Waste (EfW) facility at North Hykeham. Once in operation, the facility will burn waste as an alternative to increasingly costly landfill, as well as generating electricity for sale to the National Grid. It will also have the potential to heat local homes and businesses through a district heating scheme.
- Land has been purchased and planning permission obtained at Grantham, Boston, Sleaford and Gainsborough for four Waste Transfer Stations to divert waste to the EfW facility. Work is almost complete on the Grantham WTS; construction on the others is about to start.
- Successful retendering for recycling centres meant that no closures were required to achieve the £1.2m savings for this financial year. Changes to opening arrangements have been widely publicised, including in the launch edition of the new County News magazine.
- Almost 53% of household waste is now recycled, compared to a national average of 42%, thanks to residents making great use of our 13 Household Waste Recycling Centres and the excellent kerbside collections provided by district councils.
- We continue to work with Lincolnshire's district councils to achieve shared outcomes through the Lincolnshire Waste Partnership.

Our children and young people

Lincolnshire has long been a byword for superb Children's Services, and we maintained our outstanding rating in 2011.

Ofsted confirmed that we perform excellently, with a large majority of services, settings and institutions found to be good or outstanding. Almost all provision helps children and young people to learn and stay safe.

Other achievements included:

- We were judged outstanding in our 2012 Ofsted inspection for adoption services. At a time when the Government is challenging authorities to reduce delays, Lincolnshire is matching children "very quickly and efficiently" with adoptive parents. Our fostering service was also highly commended in the LGA awards.

- We have some of the best children's centres in the country, ensuring all families have access to high-quality early years and health services. Of 16 centres inspected, 14 are good or outstanding.
- Our Birth to Five Service, working in partnership with private/voluntary and independent settings, saw a significant increase in children achieving a good level of development by the end of Reception. Lincolnshire was also the most improved authority in the East Midlands and won Nursery World's Early Years Team of the Year Award.
- We offer 15 hours of early education for two-year-olds living in areas of disadvantage – a government priority. We were one of the first authorities to introduce this last year and, through additional investment of £700,000, intend to extend it to more children.
- We have increased the range of short-term breaks available to families where there is a child with a disability. 138 families accessed holiday breaks, while Family Links provided 382 overnight care opportunities to enable carers to have a break. Our positive activities and after-school clubs have been accessed 6,500 times – a significant increase.
- Lincolnshire is one of 16 national pilot areas with a community budget to support families with complex needs. The Families Working Together team, which enjoys multi-agency support, is currently working intensively with more than 70 families. Over the last year 12 families have left the service after turning their lives around successfully. This form of intervention costs an average of £8,000 per family – dramatically less than reactive interventions over a long period.
- Our safeguarding performance continues to be strong. Assessments are timely, and we have fewer children looked after than our comparable neighbours, as well as fewer children requiring a protection plan. Our residential homes offer excellent care, with five out of six judged by Ofsted as outstanding.
- Key stage 2 results for level 4 in Maths and English are once again 1% above the national average. The targeted areas for improvement are reading and attainment at level 5. We have invested an additional £3.6m to enable small schools to work collaboratively together.
- A key indicator of success in education is key stage 4 – the end of compulsory education. This year, we have again excelled, with 62% of pupils gaining 5 A* to C grades including English and Maths. This is an increase of 3% on last year, placing Lincolnshire in the top quartile of all local authorities, and 4% above the national average.
- We had exceptional A-level results, with 92% of pupils gaining two or more successes, reinforcing Lincolnshire's reputation as one of the best places in England to receive a secondary education.

- Lincolnshire's Olympic legacy programme, "Live and Learn like a Champion", has been offered to all county schools and enjoyed overwhelming support. There is a wide range of programmes planned, in addition to legacy logs, culminating in a celebration in December.
- The Music Service was assessed as outstanding and there have been superb performances by young people, encouraged by local artists in schools, in music, fashion and creative arts.
- An ambitious capital programme will ensure our schools are fit for the future. We were awarded £22m in 2011 for two new academies (Grantham and Holbeach) and are investing more than £15m over the next few years to provide new school places and improve the suitability of some schools at a time of increased birth rates in certain areas.
- Our partner CfBT Education Trust met the standards for ISO9001 accreditation in Lincolnshire.

Supporting vulnerable adults

Lincolnshire continues to have a growing elderly population due to increased life expectancy and its popularity as a retirement destination.

There is also more demand on learning and physical disability services as a result of transitions from Children's Services, people moving to Lincolnshire and increases to current care packages.

At the same time, the money available to spend on adult social care (ASC) has reduced, and significant financial savings have been delivered this year.

Important developments over the last 12 months include:

- Excellent Ageing, the county's partnership programme to improve the health and wellbeing of older people, has continued to progress, working with over 50 public, private and voluntary sector partners. The benefits of 18 core projects are now being tracked.
- A key focus of Excellent Ageing has been how to influence total spending on older people away from acute services towards a wellbeing programme. Following extensive consultation, draft priorities have been agreed by the Shadow Health and Wellbeing Board, including the further development of a wellbeing support network.
- Integrated working between Health and Social Care is increasing as a result of the Joint Reablement Programme, in partnership with Clinical Commissioning Groups and the NHS. Funding for integrated teams will ensure improved outcomes for people across Lincolnshire.

- Our in-house reablement service is continuing to improve, and the proportion of people who regain their independence as a result of intervention is increasing every month. In February, about 40% of people left the service needing no ongoing social care support.
- The decision to concentrate ASC funding on people with substantial and critical needs has allowed it to be redirected to preventative services. Our partnership with Public Health is developing universal services, and many people with moderate needs are being supported to maximise their benefits and buy alternative support privately.
- Our refreshed charging policy has increased the income received and ensured equity across all service user groups.
- Following the Shaping Care decision on council-provided residential homes, five closed in September 2011, with the remaining three due to shut by the end of this month. People who previously used these homes are now able to access personal budgets, giving them choice over the service and opportunities they receive. Comments have described the change to personal budgets as a positive experience offering a greater sense of control.
- As a result of the views expressed in the recent consultation on day services, we will be maintaining our buildings-based services to ensure people have continued access to day provision in their area. Over two years we will transfer responsibility to alternative providers, ensuring service continuation while maximising our cost effectiveness.
- The Health and Social Care Bill agreed in Parliament allows us to work even more closely with our health partners to provide services seamlessly. Work is underway to align ASC to the 4 Clinical Commissioning Groups.
- We are working with the United Lincolnshire Hospitals Trust to manage winter pressures and ensure safe hospital discharges for vulnerable people. Assessment and Care Management staff are trialling weekend working at the Pilgrim Hospital to see if it helps with this.
- Admissions to permanent residential or nursing care in 2011/12 reduced by 19%, leading to a significant decrease in placement costs and increased numbers of people supported to remain at home.
- We continue to make progress with personal budgets and achieved the national target last year. In the 12 months to March, the proportion of people receiving a personal budget increased from 30% to 51%, and we remain committed to meeting a 100% target by March 2013. About 10% of new social care contacts are signposted to universal and preventative services by the Customer Service Centre.

- An average of 144 people are referred for the Telecare service each month and, with many more interested in buying equipment without coming through ASC, we are working with public health colleagues to develop an online shop. The technology can offer reassurance to many older people discharged from hospital.
- A new Telehealth service will enable people with a number of long-term health conditions to self-care better at home, knowing their health care provider is still fully involved. The service will be offered shortly by many GP surgeries, community nurses and hospital teams, and we are working closely with them.
- A Care Quality Commission review of the in-house community supported living service in Louth found all essential standards met.

Keeping the county safe

Highlights of the last 12 months at Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue include:

- We have taken delivery of 10 new DEFRA-funded rescue boats, giving the service one of the best capabilities in the country. Each boat is crewed by a specially trained team. Based at locations across the county, the craft will be deployed in a major flood or for search and rescue operations.
- A new service model has been agreed, ensuring we will have nine fire stations crewed by whole-time firefighters on a 24-hour basis by 2014. Weekly training time for the county's 500 retained firefighters has also been increased. Both are being achieved with no budget increase.
- The number of primary fires caused by arson fell last year from 415 to 332. There were also fewer people injured in accidental dwelling fires – down from 20 to 8. However, eight people were killed in fires, including five in one incident in Boston.
- Over 10,000 smoke alarms were fitted in 2011/12 as part of our ongoing drive to make Lincolnshire households and businesses safer.
- Our co-responders attended more than 3,000 medical emergencies in support of the East Midlands Ambulance Service.
- Fire and Rescue hosted an international Urban Search and Rescue event (Exercise Vulcan) at the Waddington training site in October 2011. Teams from the UK, USA, Germany and Spain attended.
- 12 Princes Trust volunteer programmes were completed, allowing more than 120 young people to benefit from the 12-week course.

Emergency planning

Following the success of Exercise Watermark, we won three national awards recognising its influence on national policy and east coast flood preparedness.

The team also published a case study describing how working together had enhanced local resilience and encouraged individuals and communities to take action themselves, an approach now firmly regarded as “good practice”.

Our work also led to the creation of the Joint Emergency Management Service. Based at Fire HQ, this is a unique collaboration between local authority, police, fire, health and Environment Agency emergency planners.

Following a successful peer review of the council’s emergency planning unit in 2011, the effectiveness of the joint service is being closely followed by colleagues across the country.

Our current focus includes the Olympic Torch relay, the Lincoln Christmas Market and critical incidents at residential care settings.

We continue to encourage community resilience and are working with the agricultural and horticultural sectors around flood and drought risks.

Creating safer communities

Work to protect legitimate businesses and consumers from those flouting trading laws is carried out by Trading Standards.

Working jointly with the police and HMRC, we have taken action against 28 premises to prevent the illegal sale of tobacco and alcohol, and we continue to target activities causing the greatest harm to our communities.

Last year, too, 534 high-risk victims of domestic abuse were identified and given multi-agency support, preventing further harm to them and their families.

Together with our statutory, voluntary and commercial partners, the council aims to maintain Lincolnshire as one of the lowest crime areas in the country, free of the anti-social behaviour that blights so many communities.

The council is therefore continuing to provide £1.5m a year in funding to help pay for the 59 Police Community Support Officers who provide such a reassuring and effective presence in our towns and villages.

We also look forward to working constructively with the new Lincolnshire Police Commissioner, due to be elected in November this year to replace the police authority.

In addition, the Lincolnshire Youth Offending Service is performing well against three national indicators – young people reoffending within a year; those given a warning or appearing in court for the first time; and those sentenced to custody.

On every count, Lincolnshire's rate is lower than the East Midlands. As regards custodial sentences, that reflects a local desire to keep vulnerable young people out of prison where they do not have a chance to make reparations to the community.

For all life's big moments

Once again, our Registration and Celebratory Services achieved "Customer Service Excellence" and 100% compliance with the Government's standard.

This reflects the quality of the service provided to residents registering births and deaths, getting married or forming civil partnerships, and celebrating a renewal of vows or naming ceremony.

In addition, 464 new British citizens were formally welcomed in citizenship ceremonies in 2011/12 – an increase of 15% on the previous year.

Reducing property costs

As members will know, work is underway to rationalise our property holdings, potentially saving £1m per year by 2014. Successes include:

- Disposals have increased from £4m to over £9m. We are also reducing the costs of vacant property, such as security and rates.
- We have achieved space savings of over 30% in Lincoln, Boston and Bourne. Further savings and redundant buildings have been identified in Grantham, Sleaford, Horncastle, Louth and Gainsborough. Property reviews saved more than £300,000 last year.
- Farm rents are rising, as are values per acre, and we are continuing to manage the farm estate to ensure best value.
- All property budgets are now centrally managed, and a new one-stop facilities management service has been put in place, achieving further savings.

Business support

The last 12 months have seen significant progress towards a single Business Support service, with benefits and efficiencies already being realised.

Based on the success of early savings in 2011/12, future efficiency targets have been brought forward into this financial year.

Business Support is also progressing with its multi-skilling of staff to provide a fully comprehensive and flexible support service.

As well as its “back office” role, Business Support provides key services directly to communities, for example, Blue Badge.

It's all about customers

Whether thinking about residents, visitors or business people, we are driven by what our customers need.

Many contact us through the Customer Services Centre (CSC), which has recorded some impressive achievements:

- Last year the CSC handled nearly 800,000 phone calls and contacted more than 120,000 customers directly, each call saving the council about £4 compared with a face-to-face enquiry. It also actioned 40,000 emails.
- In March, it was independently judged to be meeting high standards under Customer Contact Association (CCA) accreditation, with clear customer focus, good complaint handling and effective staff training.
- Overall customer satisfaction in this service remains high, at 97%.
- The CSC continues to provide support to partners through an out-of-hours call handling service for three district councils, as well as offering customer service training and business continuity.
- The Head of Customer Service recently won the CCA's Member Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Contact Centre Industry.

Keeping residents informed

One of the many ways we communicate with residents is through County News, which was relaunched in March as a new quarterly magazine.

The publication has a modern, fresh look, with eye-catching designs and short articles suitable for our readers' busy lives. We also offer two pages of advertising space in each edition to other public sector organisations.

In an innovative example of joint working, we have teamed up with West Lindsey District Council to produce a special 32-page edition for that area.

The reduced frequency of County News means it is now costing about £240,000 a year less than in 2010, when we produced 10 editions. Each copy only costs 15p to produce and distribute.

In other developments, the Communications department, while conscious of those not inclined to Tweet or Facebook, has reacted to demand by expanding our social media presence – a fantastic, cost-effective and immediate way to reach residents.

Our corporate Twitter account now has over 3,000 Followers, including 1,000 new ones in the last four months alone, while Gritter Twitter amassed 600 Followers within just 48 hours during the bad weather in February.

We currently have 20 Twitter accounts and 13 Facebook pages, covering a range of campaign and project-based work.

Councillor Big Society Fund

Last but by no means least, I must highlight the positive impact the Councillor Big Society Fund is having in local communities.

As you know, the decision by members of all political parties to forego a recommended increase in their allowances for two years has released about £160,000 a year for good causes.

Local councillors are now choosing how to allocate the £2,000 a year available to them and, at the last count, had given £118,000 to 276 good causes.

For some small community groups, a little extra money at a difficult time can make all the difference between survival and closure, and I thank you for your diligence in spending the money wisely.

On a different subject, the current bureaucratic national standards regime regulating councillors' conduct is being abolished by the Localism Act.

We welcome this and will replace it with a much simpler Code of Conduct and local arrangements for dealing with complaints about councillors, retaining independent input from outside the council.

Conclusion

In closing, I should stress that the successes I have highlighted represent just a small selection of all those I could have listed had space allowed.

Despite that, I hope members and officers will share my satisfaction at what we have achieved at a time of significant reductions in funding and staffing.

Of course, satisfaction must never become complacency, and this council will not be deflected from the hard work that lies ahead.

As I have said, we are just over one year into a four-year budget plan that requires us to deliver savings of £125m. We are firmly on track to do that, but no-one should imagine the next three years will be easy. They will not.

In addition, a growing elderly population, new responsibilities and funding changes – among other things – present both new challenges and new opportunities. It is our job to meet those challenges and seize those opportunities for the people of Lincolnshire.

That means constantly finding new and better ways of providing local services – good, value-for-money services, within the limits of what this council and the country can reasonably afford.

On the subject of innovation, I am delighted to congratulate Audit Lincolnshire on winning a prestigious national award earlier this month.

The team was recognised for two ground-breaking initiatives around our attitude and approach to risks, protecting the business and improving performance by focusing on what really matters.

May I now finish on an optimistic note, repeating my belief that Lincolnshire's long-term future is a bright one, even though we remain in choppy economic waters.

Despite the challenges we face, both as a council and as a county, we will continue putting the building blocks in place, including the necessary infrastructure and alliances, to ensure that bright future.

Finally, may I urge members and officers to try and take time in their busy lives to enjoy the Diamond Jubilee and London Olympics celebrations.

They are momentous occasions, putting this country firmly in the global spotlight, and we are right to mark them with enthusiasm and pride.



Councillor Martin Hill OBE
Leader of Lincolnshire County Council