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Dear Graham

Re: Coronavirus – Exit Strategy and the Implications for Rural Communities

Thank you for your email regarding the letter to Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, to ask that he considers rural communities when devising a COVID-19 exit strategy. We'd be grateful if you would raise the following issues on our behalf during the meeting with government officials.

We would like government to rural-proof its strategy for easing then exiting lockdown and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure it is equitable across all areas of the country. This will help to maximise opportunities for recovery but also to prevent or reduce unintended consequences for those living in rural and coastal areas. We agree with calls for local public health teams to be at the forefront of the next stage(s) of recovering from the pandemic. Whilst lockdown restrictions may be eased consistently across the country, the measures brought forward need to take account of the differences between regions, their populations and infrastructure.

To date Lincolnshire has had the second lowest COVID-19 transmission rates in the East Midlands (after Rutland), suggesting that being a rural county may be a protective factor. This is despite having a large older population, a high prevalence of people with underlying health conditions (e.g. the East Coast of Lincolnshire has the second highest prevalence of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and Diabetes in the East Midlands (Source: Public Health England Health Profiles) and a large proportion of the population still having to attend work in the health, care and agriculture sectors.

We support elements of the lockdown restrictions being eased to enable the local economy to resume; however, we also have concerns about the risks posed to the health of our residents from a potential influx of tourists from more densely populated

urban areas that still have higher infection rates. It might be sensible to prioritise certain economic sectors to serve local communities but with a degree of caution about opening up too fast. In Lincolnshire, we particularly recognise the value of:

- Roles in food production for national wellbeing.
- Small businesses and alternative delivery methods e.g. takeaways, hairdressers and outdoor roles (window cleaners, gardeners, builders, etc.). We have particularly large numbers of small businesses and sole traders, whose return to normal could secure their future. Residents in rural areas have adapted to online shopping and home deliveries; whilst this is positive, it could also affect the future of rural high streets, independent shops and sole traders who may not be eligible for business grants.

Easing the lockdown must be accompanied with robust and widespread COVID-19 testing (for both symptoms and antibodies) and contact tracing. We are ready to support with the national rollout of these. We would also need to be in a position to respond effectively to a potential second rise in infection rates in the county. We would also request prioritisation for COVID-19 vaccination of rural residents in the lower socio economic statuses when one is available.

To support recovery we may need to accelerate initiatives to address challenges in rural areas such as:

1. Recruitment and retention of health and care staff.
2. Digital connections. Good connectivity will be crucial for contact tracing (apps), remote working and social connections.
3. Schemes such as the Towns Fund and Tourism Sector Deal. We hope these will continue and indeed be strengthened to support recovery in parts of Lincolnshire.
4. Rural affordable housing. Flexible funding and support from Homes England at this time could help accelerate delivery and support the construction industry to recover at the same time as addressing needs arising as a result of the response to COVID-19 (e.g. providing move on accommodation for the rough sleepers housed in temporary accommodation). Once Britain is past this crisis, the attraction of life in rural areas may become even more evident for city dwellers that have not had the benefit of gardens or other open space. If people choose to move out it may increase demand and prices in rural areas.
5. Lifestyle behaviour changes. Residents have become more accustomed to daily exercise and cooking from scratch. The benefits gained through healthy eating and physical activity should not be lost as lockdown is eased (the lowest levels of each in the county being seen along the East Coast).

We also wish to build on the response of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to the COVID-19 pandemic. Seeing local support and groups helping each other through the crisis has been heartening. These have been captured in a local directory of service and efforts to sustain them will be crucial to tackling issues such as loneliness in the longer term as well as remaining in place to deal with possible future emergencies. The National Centre for Rural Health and Care (NCHC) carried out a survey and 76 VCS organisations across Lincolnshire responded. In terms of planning for recovery the results identified that provision of professional advice services for VCS bodies was very important. There were concerns that vulnerable

groups will need focused and on-going support. Homeless people currently in new accommodation for example will need very careful support post crisis.

We believe that following the lines outlined in this letter will help towns such as Skegness, Mablethorpe and Sleaford and in turn the surrounding rural areas. The report 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our towns and cities' (Centre for Towns, 23 April 2020) named these towns as suffering a disproportionate negative economic impact as a result of the tourism sector and small businesses and independent traders being closed down for a prolonged period. Coastal towns in particular lack the existing resilience to be expected to cope well.

Food production businesses will also be able to return closer to normal operation. Farms have had to diversify in recent years with more and more running additional businesses alongside farming, many of which have had to close during lockdown. Recovery comes at a time when subsidies after Britain exits the European Union have not been confirmed. In rural areas social isolation is compounded by poorer transport connections and unreliable broadband. A return to permitting some small social gatherings in the near future would be welcomed.

Reports have shown that deprived areas are likely to have been hit harder by COVID-19. Lincolnshire's East Coast stands out as being amongst the most deprived 10 per cent of neighbourhoods nationally. Whilst infection rates have been low to date, these could increase significantly with an influx of tourists, but without this, deprivation could worsen. Specific consideration of the needs of struggling coastal towns would be a valuable extension to rural proofing. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is, however, biased in favour of urban deprivation and under-plays rural deprivation issues which need to be understood and recognised.

National support bodies such as the Rural Services Network, NCHC, Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) Rural Public Health Network, Rural Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) and the Coastal Communities Alliance should be included in discussions on the government plans to exit the pandemic. Government, in turn should work with Local Enterprise Partnerships, Local Resilience Forums and Local Authorities to recover from this pandemic.

Yours sincerely



Professor Derek Ward
Director of Public Health



Councillor Sue Woolley
Chairman of the Lincolnshire Health and Wellbeing Board

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