



Open Report on behalf of Andy Gutherson, Executive Director – Place

Report to:	Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee
Date:	13 July 2021
Subject:	The Impact of Covid-19 on Lincolnshire's High Streets

Summary:

Our towns have evolved over centuries, developing as places to shop, work, visit, relax and interact. Their histories have shaped their identities and communities have developed around them. The current pandemic has exacerbated the trajectory of change previously identified. The dramatic move to home working, increase in internet shopping and home deliveries has removed our dependence on our town centres at a pace more revolutionary than evolutionary, yet the need for community remains.

This paper provides some context for the current changes, and highlights some of the work happening across the public sector, considers briefly what the Council's ability to affect change might be, and in particular the proposal to use publicly owned buildings and land to increase footfall, including by providing "hubs" in town centres.

Actions Required:

The Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee is requested to:

- (1) consider the international, national and local trends affecting Lincolnshire's High Streets.
- (2) consider the questions in the paper and debate what could form a helpful High Street review, building on the 2019 review.
- (3) share thoughts and ideas to help shape the development of hub provision in Lincolnshire, and the future funding landscape such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

1. Background

The Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee has previously considered the challenges facing Lincolnshire's High Streets, including an informal review of town centres in 2019.

The economic shock of the pandemic has exacerbated a number of trends that were identified at that time and leaves a number of questions to be considered, in particular the function and form of our High Streets and the role of the public sector.

- **It is estimated that the pandemic has accelerated the trend of decline by 5 years**
- **Real and perceived lack of opportunities lead to increased outward migration to larger urban areas**
- **The continued rise in "clicks over bricks" as people continue to choose to shop online**

Left unchecked, there is a risk that our High Streets will lose their purpose and become increasingly unappealing places to spend time. Functions are evolving and not all our places will or should look the same.



It should be noted that there are a number of investments that are currently taking place that could have a positive impact on our towns and the city.

Investment through the levelling up agenda:

- Towns Funding – funding committed to Skegness, Mablethorpe, Boston and Lincoln.
- Levelling Up Fund – bids have been submitted for the A16 by LCC, but submissions for Gainsborough, market towns in the Wolds, Boston and Lincoln all have regeneration themes.
- UK Community Renewal Fund – a revenue funding stream that includes investment in projects that will contribute to the High Street.

The above funding applications all look to develop High Streets to be places where people want to spend time to "dwell". Recognising that a successful High Street must be supported to evolve, to include other aspects, in addition to retail. The solutions will need to be multiple and will involve a range of stakeholders, including the public sector.

Lincolnshire County Council's Library service is responsible for 15 core libraries and 34 community library hubs, all of which operate the 'People's Network' which provides free public access to computers and the internet. All sites offer printing facilities and free Wi-Fi that can also be accessed via customer's own devices. Most libraries have study spaces, casual seating and room hire options available to customers, including small businesses.

Additionally, the Council's Growth team has begun to develop projects focussed on creating multi use spaces, digital hubs and drop in workspaces across the county. Together these provide a provision for businesses and individuals and provide footfall on the High Streets.

Survey and evaluation work is being undertaken to identify publicly owned buildings and other assets across market towns which could be repurposed to deliver similar objectives. The initial investigation found 179 sites across 11 towns. This is in the process of being refined.

From a place to drop into work, to a digital hub:

Many people are now seeking a place to drop into to work and to meet – perhaps for half a day. Digital hubs are physical spaces with access to superfast broadband alongside community and business focussed services. They provide digital connectivity, support the development of digital skills, and encourage the use of emergent digital technologies.

Questions for consideration

1. What is the experience of members of their local towns following the pandemic?
2. Are businesses in your divisions working differently following the pandemic?

2. Conclusion

This report sets out the emerging response to the impact of the pandemic on Lincolnshire's High Streets.

Digital Hubs are potentially part of the jigsaw, alongside other elements such as urban living and an increase in leisure use.

3. Consultation

a) Risks and Impact Analysis

None

4. Background Papers

No background papers within Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972 were used in the preparation of this report.

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