

## REPORT TO PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MARCH 2021.

### **REPORT UNDER RULE 2(vi) OF THE COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULES REPORT BY COUNCILLOR NEIL MURRAY, PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH**

This last year has been the most challenging in my time as a city councillor. Covid has caused huge damage to the national economy and to our local economy. The visitor and hospitality sectors have been worst hit. Unfortunately we have also had to contend with the government's policy of Austerity which continues into 2021. Year on year reductions in government support for local authorities has meant that we are not able to do many of the things we would like to do to support local businesses and encourage investment and growth in the city. When we return to a post covid society there needs to be change in the relationship between central and local government in order for local councils to contribute effectively to rebuilding local economies.

#### RESPONDING TO COVID

The city council has mobilised a dedicated team to deliver the government's business financial support scheme. Since the start of the November lockdown the council has issued 4,235 grants to 935 businesses totalling just over £8.4 million. This is in addition to the grants paid over the summer to approximately 1,700 businesses to a value of over £21 million.

#### Business grants – lockdown 2

##### A - MANDATORY GRANTS.

For rate-paying businesses mandated to close during government imposed local or national restrictions. These grants are paid on a regular and ongoing basis as long as the restrictions are in place. The payments are due every fourteen days during local restrictions or for longer periods in the case of national lockdowns (28 days in November, 42 days for the current lockdown period to 15<sup>th</sup> February).

##### B - DISCRETIONARY GRANTS.

These grants are for the council to administer at its discretion. We have used these funds to support businesses which have “fallen through the cracks as it were of the mandatory scheme. For example:

- Closed businesses that do not pay business rates such as those who share space or B & Bs.
- Businesses which have not been mandated to close but have been severely impacted by the restrictions (for example those in the hospitality, leisure supply chain).

The funding cannot be used as a wage or income top up and hence the requirement to evidence ongoing business costs.

#### DISCRETIONARY FUNDING

A total of £2,868,060 has been allocated to the council to administer on a discretionary basis (known as the Additional Restrictions Grant or ARG). This funding can be deployed at the discretion of the council up to March 2022 and must be focussed on providing direct support to businesses. It cannot be used as a wage top up.

As of 9<sup>th</sup> February a total of £359,402 has been spent supporting those businesses not covered by the mandatory schemes. This covers November (lockdown 2) December (tier 3 and 4) and closed, non rate paying businesses. January/February (42 day Lockdown/top up). Further grants for businesses which are “open but impacted” are expected to be paid from this fund for the current lockdown period.

This grant funding will continue to be deployed to support businesses that do not meet the mandatory criteria as long as lockdown or restrictions continue. We are planning for this to be at least until April 2021.

In addition to the continued support with running costs, our officers are working on a package of further support to help economic recovery. This is being informed by direct feedback from businesses (through a question on the grant application form) and interviews with intermediaries (FSB, Visit Lincoln, Lincoln BIG, LSIP, Lincoln university and others). A report will be presented to Executive and a number of indicative measures are being considered:

- A business kick start or revival scheme to help businesses cover the cost of new equipment or fit out to enable them to diversify or operate in a covid safe way, including the opportunity to digitalise.
- Direct and additional support for the visitor economy sector and High Street recovery, for example with digital marketing, sales, training and mentoring and events.
- Opportunities to support start ups/self employed in the digital sector.

At the time of writing this report (2<sup>nd</sup> March) the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced that he will be offering new types of grants to businesses affected by covid grants to help them through the weeks or months of continuing restrictions. Details to follow at the Budget on 3<sup>rd</sup> March.

#### THE ECONOMIC EFFECT ON LINCOLN PEOPLE.

We can see that the business support schemes will, hopefully, keep lots of businesses afloat. Unfortunately many of our neighbours have lost their jobs and have had to claim Universal Credit. The figures for the Lincoln area are alarming. In December 2019 8,852 people were claiming UC as compared to 17,973 in December 2020.

#### LINCOLN'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

Austerity has made life difficult for all councils over the last decade and we have to cut back on all kinds of services as the government has reduced the size of the state at national and local level. We were able to transform the Drill Hall from a military building into a cultural centre with the help of the former East Midlands Development Agency. We subsidised the operation of the Drill hall in return for a diverse range of activities and it worked well until last year when a mixture of continuing Austerity and an ever reducing revenue budget meant we had to look carefully again at all services. The advent of covid and the collapse of income meant we had to end our support for the venue. I think it is a sad day when district councils are so poorly funded that we can no longer support venues like the Drill hall.

At the time of writing the future of the Usher art gallery is uncertain. We own the Usher but the County council operate it under an arrangement established under local government reorganisation in the early 1970's. The county can

afford to maintain the Usher but appear to be determined to shut it down. They seem to enjoy cutting services and seem to take a view that art is best funded by the philanthropy of wealthy people. The Usher should be an important part of our visitor offer linking in with the Collection.

#### HERITAGE AND REGENERATION ACTIVITY.

Covid has delayed or interrupted a number of initiatives but I am pleased to say that we are forging ahead with the High Street Heritage Action Zone (HAZ). The HAZ is a grant funded, heritage led, regeneration scheme which is conducted in partnership with Heritage England and will run over four years utilising £ 1.7 million. There are three strands to the programme namely Community, Cultural and physical interventions.

Our key capital and built environment projects are-

- Lower High Street and Sincil Street shop fronts
- St Mary le Wigford
- Wigford Way intersection
- The Barbican/Albion hotel
- St Mary's Guildhall
- Lincoln Central Market

The scheme starts at St Mary's Guildhall and extends northwards along the High Street and eastwards to include the market and Sincil Street. We have recruited a project manager and the scheme will offer grants to shop owners to improve their shop fronts and will fund investigations and physical works to and for historic buildings. These will improve the look of shop fronts and conserve the historic fabric of the older buildings.

For example as part of the HAZ we have hired a consultant to undertake a condition survey of St Mary's Guildhall with the aim of bringing the building back into a structurally stable condition. It is an exceptionally historic building believed to date from 1157 and occupied by the Guild of St Mary for many years. The city council own the building and it is currently tenanted by the Civic Trust.

The initial conservation works will examine a number issues including –

- Assessment of building performance
- Drainage and rainwater goods
- Settlement
- Dampness
- Structural movement
- Water and moisture ingress
- Fungal attack
- Insect attack
- Maintenance guidance and strategy
- Pricing schedule for estimated cost of works and estimated time to carry out those works

## THE GUILDHALL

Rich Storey made a report to the Historic Environment Advisory Panel recently on the results of a programme of dendrochronological investigations undertaken in the Guildhall on timbers around the building. The work was carried out opportunistically when asbestos was removed from the building and before the areas were enclosed.

This is the first such work undertaken in the Guildhall and showed a variety of oak timber from different points in time. For example joists supporting the small landing at the stairwell were likely felled between 1460 and 1490. The most notable finding is that the timber lintel above a door in the cellar was dated as being felled in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century but perhaps more interestingly was dated as growing from around the year 970 when the Danes dominated this part of England. We hope more such work can be undertaken with the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology so we can learn more about the building.

## PARK WARD (SINCIL BANK AREA).

One of our key regeneration priorities is to improve The Sincil Bank area of Park ward. I am very pleased to see that the residents have supported the extension of our Residents' Parking Scheme to cover the area from the football club northwards to Portland Street. This will improve the quality of life with many fewer commuter and shopping vehicles parked in the area.

I was also very pleased to see that the county council as Highway Authority has adopted some of the ideas generated by the consultation we undertook with the help of our consultants some time ago to stop rat runs and improve the streets in the tightly bound area. The County have bid for money from the Towns Fund and I hope they will be successful in being awarded the funds necessary to do the work and bring tangible benefits to the residents in terms of air quality improvements and a significant reduction in through traffic.

Covid has slowed many projects down but we remain committed to major regeneration works at Hermit Street. The regeneration and new build works we are planning in the area will represent the biggest improvement in Park ward since demolition of the houses which used to occupy the land. These works will have a positive knock on effect for the whole Sincil Bank area and will offer new build social housing in the city centre area.

#### AFTER COVID – ECONOMIC RECOVERY STRATEGY

We will be working with various partners to develop an Economic Recovery strategy to address the serious damage done by covid to the visitor and hospitality sectors in particular. If the council grant planning permission for the Western Growth corridor/Swanpool development the local economy will be boosted substantially over a period of years as the site is developed.

We have bid for a substantial share of the Towns Fund scheme monies which could amount to £25million. We should find out on Budget day and if successful we are looking to transform the Central Market.

We recently held a public consultation exercise to seek the public's views on our plans for the market. If we secure the funds we are seeking to –

- Demolish the existing, poor quality, WCs and butchers/fishmongers corridor
- Build a new commercial unit on that part of the market with potential retail or bar/restaurant use over ground and first floor with a balcony overlooking Sincil Street.
- Create a reconfigured market hall with both new and refurbished stalls catering for food and non food retail and a central food court area offering people a place to enjoy a drink and a meal.

- Create a new dedicated butchers/fishmonger sales area located at the western end of the market hall below a new mezzanine floor and accessed from within the hall.
- Provide new, high quality unisex public toilets including an accessible, all accessed from the refurbished hall.
- Create a mezzanine level at the western end providing a flexible commercial space and bar/cafe.
- Open up the stone arches and replace the stone with glazing to provide natural light and visibility from inside and outside the hall.
- Replace the existing stalls and replicate the original stalls from 1938.
- Redesign of city square to connect with the market and provide an attractive social space.

Regenerating the Central market and city square is a long standing ambition and it will add to the attraction of the Sincil Street area which is becoming a much more attractive retail destination. In turn it supports the regeneration of the broader High Street area which is under so much pressure as covid has accelerated the move away from High Street shopping to the internet.

The response to the consultation was excellent with 723 people replying and most of them expressing support for our outline plans for the building and City Square. The responses make interesting reading and confirm our views.

For example the top five reasons for not visiting the market are Lack of variety of stalls, the stalls don't sell products people want, the building feels neglected, the atmosphere is not attractive and the market is out of date.

The most popular reasons to visit is to buy fresh produce at affordable prices and the location is another positive for the market. On the negative side the internal appearance is an important reason to stay away. There was big support for glazing the arched window spaces to lighten the inside of the building cheer up the external appearance.

Fresh, local, and affordable produce is the top selling point for the new market and a cafe and good toilet facilities are a must for the big majority who responded. Longer opening hours and more utilisation of City Square were very popular and have given us a clear steer in our planning for the future.

We are in a fluid state with uncertainty regarding the pathway out of lockdown. Hopefully we will be in a more normal situation in the summer and the numerous damaged businesses can get back trading especially in tourism and the hospitality sector. We have invited traders to hire stalls at the 2021 Lincoln Christmas market which is due to be held between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of December. It is of course our biggest event and I am sure was missed by the people who attend every year and those who were hoping to attend for the first time last year. It gives our local economy a massive boost and is a great advert for our city.

COUNCILLOR NEIL MURRAY

EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH AND HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT.