

Present: Councillor Paul Gleeson (Chairman), Councillor Suzanne Welberry (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Jyothi Arayambath, Richard Austin BEM, Anton Dani, Neil Drayton, Patricia Marson, Barrie Pierpoint and Helen Staples.

Portfolio Holder Councillor Dale Broughton

Officers –

Assistant Director - Assets, Deputy Chief Executive - Communities, Assistant Director - Wellbeing and Community Leadership, Healthy Living Strategic Lead and Democratic Services Officer.

70 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were tabled for Councillor Stuart Evans. No substitute member.

71 MINUTES

With the agreement of the committee, the Chairman signed the minutes of the previous meeting held on the 20 July 2023.

72 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Barrie Pierpoint declared that he was a member of the steering committee for the Town Centre Strategy Action Plan.

73 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions.

74 SOUTH & EAST LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCILS PARTNERSHIP CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

The Portfolio Holder presented the report supported by the Assistant Director for Wellbeing and Community Leadership and the Lead Officer for Wellbeing and Community Leadership.

As Sovereign Councils and as a Partnership Boston Borough Council was committed to a vision of providing a customer experience that was simple, effective and customer focused and ensured access to the many services that are offered. One of the key principles to achieving that vision was to understand our communities and customers, and how they changed to inform the way the Council provided its' services, now and into the future.

The strategy sets out three key outcomes to years to achieve, an organisational culture that is customer focussed, a simple, effective, and positive customer experience and support that meets our customer's needs.

Success would be monitored through the South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership Customer Experience Board who would have oversight of the Strategy and work collaboratively to enable effective strategic direction and co-ordination of delivery.

Members were advised that as part of the 2023/24 South and East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership (SELCP) Annual Delivery Plan, development of a shared Customer Experience Strategy was a key strand to assist the councils' improvement in delivering a cost-effective operating model whilst supporting service delivery.

Each of the three councils, that formed the South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership, were responsible for delivering a wide range of public services.

The strategy enabled SELCP to move away from 'customer service' as the responsibility of a single team or department. Instead, it recognised the importance to the whole organisation and ensured providing a simple, effective and positive customer experience to be part of the Councils' core vision and values that every council employee subscribed to.

For the purpose of this strategy, the Council's "customers" were identified as residents', businesses, people who work in or visit the area, community groups and charities and partners working with the Councils. Working collaboratively through the Customer Experience Board and with oversight from Portfolio Holder would ensure links identified with the SELCP ICT and Digital Strategy for a consistent approach.

The Strategic Lead for Wellbeing and Community Leadership addressed the meeting and advised members that that the ethos of the work being undertaken was that of a clear and consistent approach. The emerging action plan would be adopted by all services including those provided by PSPS. Officers recognised the challenges of its implementation in Boston which was a diverse community and following the last census, it had been identified as one of the largest areas of population growth. Whilst the Borough had the youngest average age across the 3 areas, it also have an ageing population resulting in an increase dependency of support for vulnerable residents. With changes in society and ongoing improvements to digital technology, residents had differing expectations at to the service they required. The provision of a user friendly digital service with clear signposting, would allow access at whatever time customers needed to use it, freeing up time for an improved service level for customers who required a face to face service. A good approach would be taken to prevent interactions from occurring, allowing management of demand on the service and also on expectation of the service.

Significant committee deliberation followed which has been condensed, key points collated where possible and included:

In response to a question asking what measures were in place to ensure that the same level of service would be achieved across all areas to address the level of customer expectation, The Assistant Director for Wellbeing and Health advised that whilst it was recognised it would be challenging, an incremental approach would be taken to align the overall service over time.

Concern was noted that there were no residents on the Board at the current time and the lack of their perspective on the plan was a key omission. Officers agreed that residents' engagement was fundamental and would be taking place both informally and formally as the customers were central to the strategy.

The importance of liaison with the various foreign national communities within the Borough was also recognised, ensuring language provision and translation facilities where necessary and liaison should also take place with the community leaders in the town. Suggestions also noted consultation with letting agents and face to face consultations in the market place.

Members voiced strong concern of the need to consult with both elderly residents and disabled residents on a face to face basis with focus groups.

Many elderly residents would not engage with the digital provision available as they did not feel confident in using the website option and despite the Officers advice that data confirmed the over 65's were the fastest growing group of I.T users.

Members stressed that face to face consultations were required as they were very aware of the large number of elderly residents in the town who were not I.T literate. Many felt vulnerable and isolated due to their not being able to access services or information and consideration should be given to using local radio stations and also simple pamphlets to provide basic contact information for phone numbers.

Reassurance was provided that partners including primary care and support services and voluntary organisations were all being consulted.

Concern was voiced at the statement of *'we will say sorry if we get things wrong and put it right, quickly'*, which members felt was not a strong statement.

Addressing the draft document, a number of issues were raised with agreement that the wording of the document was written in Council language with the statement *'we believe that there is a way this can be achieved through an integrated sub-regional offer'* having not been written for ease of general reading by the public or those with learning or health difficulties. Furthermore it was agreed the document was too long and complex in its content, with members' agreeing that a precise was required on a single paper with bullet points, to ensure clarity of understanding by all parties in the consultation process. Further concern noted the document read top down, there was no reference for residents to contact their Ward Councillors who were had not been mentioned anywhere within the document, and nothing to direct residents to a 'remedy' section of where to go to if 'something went wrong'.

Referencing data provided in respect of the number of face to face contacts within a year, concern noted that the figure appeared low in comparison to the population figure with 25% of the population being over 65's the figure indicated that many did not feel welcome to visit the Council. Concern was also noted at the length of time taken to answer calls across the services and time wasted holding on for a long time. Additional concern noted the tone and brusqueness of some operators answering calls and the impression they gave.

Summarising the Chairman stated that it seemed that the committee had agreed the principle of the document and what it was trying to be achieve across the Partnership and also agreed that the document was informative. However, in light of the number of key concerns which had been identified during the deliberations, the reporting author was requested to return the document to the committee following the consultation process. The committee could at that point appraise the document and the changes made, prior to making its recommendation(s) to Cabinet.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Corporate and Community Committee seek the following consideration prior to finalisation of the document:

- That a member(s) of the public be co-opted to the Board.
- That a precise of the document be provided for all consultation exercises to enable full comprehension by all parties.
- That re-wording of certain areas of the document be considered in line with the committee comment that the document is not written for public ease of understanding.
- That face to face consultation be undertaken with focus groups across the borough to include those with the elderly and disabled.
- That the document include a section for 'where to go' if a resident has an issue.
- That Boston Borough Councillors be included both in consultation and in the document as a reference point for residents.
- That the document be re submitted to committee on completion of the final draft.

75 BOSTON TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN 2023-2027

The Portfolio Holder presented the report supported by the Deputy Chief Executive for Communities.

Boston Town Centre is a jet economic and social hub for the Borough of Boston. Importantly it is a sub-regional retail center that provides retail employment as well as having a number of visitor attractions. The town center has like many towns in the Country, suffered in recent times due to many factors including the pandemic and the rise in internet shopping. However, it still has a lot to offer.

The strategy and action plan covered the period 2023 – 2027 and provided a vision and objectives, along with 70 actions which cover 4 themes of clean and safe, open for business, culture heritage and events and also transformation. In developing the piece of work, those involved were committee to working in partnership with residents, businesses, communities and partners, including working very closely with BTAC the Chairman of which having been involved throughout the process. The aim being to revitalise the high street and the surrounding public realm, making it a town center to be proud of and a place recognised for its great heritage.

The Deputy Chief Executive for Communities provided a visual presentation confirming that there were 7 key points to address in the structure of the strategy including an action plan, vision and key strategic objections, management of a dynamic space, challenges and opportunities and also to measure the success with emerging themes and actions and moving to recommendation for consideration.

Members were advised that the strategy had to maximise the priorities for the people of Boston and play to its strengths as a historic center known nationally and internationally as the home of Boston Stump and the connection with the Pilgrim Fathers, and with over 150 listed buildings with the locality.

The strategy included within its scope, central park with it being part of the offer of the town, and areas either side of the river including the coach and train stations. The economic area of the town center comprised of 52 hectares and with changes to the retail sector and shopping habits, its role as a retail center was in decline. There was however a well-established market and the town benefited from a good number of car parks.

Feedback from the consultation process to date and identified key areas of focus including tourism, use of the waterways, being welcoming and the need for more business and also use of existing buildings and land.

Key strategic objectives identified included the need for a clean and tidy town center, to ensure residents and visitors all felt safe both in the daytime and in the evening and for businesses to be able to thrive. Access and egress of the town center needed to be simple for everyone and to build a cohesive community working effectively with public sector partners, businesses and the community and voluntary sector.

Challenges would include limited resources, what to do with empty shop units, the negativity of Boston following Christmas 2022 and ongoing perceptions about community cohesion and community safety.

There were however opportunities including seeking an increase in capacity by working through volunteering and funding bids, putting into practice an intelligent led approach to littering and fly tipping and better support for all communities through events that positively unite the range of communities. Additionally those involved would work alongside the Growth Directorate to help and develop a strategic approach to Town Center Management and also to seek support from the Levelling Up partnership.

Thematic areas identified included Clean and Safe, Open for Business Culture, Heritage and Events, and Transformation. Full consultation would take place between the 15th September to the 15th October

Committee deliberation followed which is summarised and included:

Comments from members' in respect of their vision and aspirations' for the town included the need for improved cleanliness and safety for both residents and visitors; the need to build a tourism hub and also the need to make Boston a destination. Suggestions for improvements included improved signage for car parks to encourage use of the sites currently underused, expansion of the markets offer as a key attraction, promotion of the town as an historic site for film makers and clearance of river banks to provide relaxing walkways away from the town centre in a safe environment. Additional suggestions included an annual programme of a variety of festivals to build year on year repeat attendance.

Concern noted that the emphasis appeared to be on residents and not visitors, with the visitor economy being worth £95mil per annum, additional reference and emphasis to the visitors was required. A suggestion of a task and finish group to look at pro-actively improving the visitor economy was suggested.

Whilst agreeing the benefit of working with the Stump in its' use of hosting the Tourist Information Centre, concern was raised at the current lack of use of the Guildhall and the urgent need to get it opened and operating as a full time visitors attraction.

Referencing the Wormgate area of the town, a member suggested that it be taken forward as a bespoke area in its own right, with independent shops and eateries which would complement the cobbled street and lend itself to an 'olde-worlde' aesthetic.

Addressing the issue of the empty shops, the suggestion of using vinyl's within the windows was made, with a themed tag-line about the town providing a consistent reference to its facilities.

When referencing the key issues for focus on it was overwhelmingly agreed that the two main areas for initial address were those of safety and cleanliness and both needed to be prioritised, prior to taking any other initiatives forward. There was a clear issue with cleanliness in the town despite early morning cleaning services and although the reference of a 'perception of fear' was often used, it a was very real feeling of fear for many residents who felt intimidated and afraid in the town centre with large groups of residents massing at the Ingram memorial. A large number of whom continued to drink alcohol throughout the day, with no enforcement action taken, and many elderly residents no longer visited their town.

The Portfolio Holder confirmed that an umbrella document for a markets development plan was bring created with a full review of the markets provision being undertaken. The introduction of the teenage market had been successful and the new traders were being integrated between the established traders to expand the market off. An introduction pack had been produced for traders at other markets, offering them incentives to consider trading at Boston. Face to face consultations were being held with the public and the traders on market days to gain a wide range of feedback.

Further pressure needed to be put on the Environment Agency in respect of the clearing and maintenance of the riverside banks around the town which were strewn with shopping trolleys and overgrown weeds and foliage, with the waterways being included within the strategy as a tourism asset for the town.

Concluding, the Chairman agreed the comments and suggestions which had been tabled and suggested that the subject of car parking charges needed to be looked into in more detail. Whilst recognising that it was a major income stream for the Council and as such free parking could not be provided, a review of all the sites, the signage for visitors to the sites and the current charging structure overall, could potentially result in improved usage of the sites and increased income. He urged communication with all parties in producing the strategy to ensure residents fully understood what it was intended to produce, and echoed the suggestion that a slogan or strap line was needed to tie the process together, for a simple ease of reference point.

76 WORK PROGRAMME

The Assistant-Director for General Fund Assets (Lead Officer for the committee) updated members on the recent workshop which had considered the work programme moving forward over the next few years. Subjects raised included looking at health scrutiny with ULHT and others; consideration of the change in funding footway lighting to the Parish Councils' and housing matters relating to private sector housing with members advised that a briefing paper was being produced for a briefing in November, which could be used as the initial reference point to identify any possible future scrutiny. Another suggestion was how to look at stimulating residents to engage with democracy. Furthermore, in response to a suggestion to look into the current population dynamics of the Borough, members were advised that the previous regime had received an update to the original population review in 2013 – identifying the position 10 years on from the report and that update report could be used as an initial reference point for new members to appraise them of the work done historically.

The Chairman stressed that he wanted the work programme to be realistic in the amount of officer time that would be required in any additional scrutiny strand, and that a more structured and realistic time-line be provided at the next scheduled meeting in November.

It was agreed to table the updated report to the 2013 Population report at the next scheduled meeting to familiarise members with the position, prior to making any decision on any additional scrutiny thereafter.

The Meeting Closed at 8.45 pm