

Present: Councillor Barrie Pierpoint (Chairman), Councillor Patricia Marson (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Alison Austin, Anton Dani, Neil Drayton, Anne Dorrian, Paul Gleeson, Sandeep Ghosh, Mike Gilbert, Andy Izard, Lina Savickiene and Stephen Woodliffe

Portfolio Holder Councillor Dale Broughton

Guests from Lincolnshire Housing Partnership:

Mr Anthony Read Chairman

Mr Murray McDonald Chief Executive

Mr Mark Coupland Executive Director Customers.

Officers –

Assistant Director - Culture and Leisure, Deputy Chief Executive - Communities., Local Communities Development Officer & BTAC Grant Administrator and Democratic Services Officer

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were tabled by Councillors Jyothi Arayambath and Emma Cresswell.

2 MINUTES

The Chairman confirmed that the hard copy minute to be signed had been amended at point 4 to read 1800 hours and not 1899 hours as within the draft minute. Committee then agreed they be signed by the Chairman.

3 UPDATE ON ACTIONS FROM THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

No updates

4 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillors Neil Drayton and Patsie Marson declared they were tenants of Lincolnshire Housing Partnership.

Councillor Alison Austin referenced the first item of business and declared that as a Director of Centrepont Outreach, she would remain in the meeting for the item but would take no part in any deliberation or determination of the item.

Councillor Stephen Woodliffe declared that he was a public member of Blackfriars Theatre Boston referenced within the third item of business.

5 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions.

6 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME

No public representation.

7 BTAC SMALL GRANT SCHEME AND BTAC EMPOWERING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES GRANT SCHEME.

The Local Communities Development Officer and BTAC Grant Administrator presented the report and confirmed that two eligible applications had been received in Round 2 of the Boston Town Area Committee Small Grant Scheme, and no eligible applications had been received in Round 2 of the Empowering Healthy Communities Grant Scheme.

The first application had been from the Citizens Advice Mid-Lincolnshire and been for a £1000.00 contribution towards the cost of telephone translation services to support BTAC clients who first language was not English.

The second application had been from Centrepont Outreach for a £500.00 contribution towards the purchase of food for their Cook Along With Us sessions.

The BTAC Small Grants Group had agreed both applications

Committee were further advised that the Communities and Leadership Team were intending to submit a report BTAC at its meeting in November 2023 following a review of the current BTAC Empowering Healthy Communities Grant Scheme currently available to community groups and organisations operating within and for the benefit of the BTAC area. This review was a response to whether the fund and its criteria was appropriate and relevant in the post-covid climate.

RESOLVED:

BTAC ratified the decisions of the Small Grants Group.

8 ATTENDANCE BY REPRESENTATIVES FROM LINCOLNSHIRE HOUSING PARTNERSHIP. (LHP)

The Chairman formerly welcomed Mr Anthony Read the Chairman of Lincolnshire Housing Partnership, Mr Murray MacDonald the Chief Executive and Mr Mark Coupland the Executive Director of Customers.

Addressing the committee Mr Read confirmed it had been 18 months since their last attendance at BTAC which had proved to be a positive meeting and he recognised that the committee now had a large number of new members. Members were thanked for the submission of questions in advance of the meeting, enabling LHP to provide comprehensive answers and the nature of the question reflected the fact that things did go wrong, with clear identification of those issues in high visibility areas being prominent within the questions. Members were advised that LHP facilitated around 50,000 repairs per year, with the vast majority being repaired without delay or any need for further intervention. Referencing the recent press release in respect of a potential merger by LHP with Ongo, Mr Read invited Mr MacDonald to update the meeting further.

Members were advised that the consultation process was currently taking place across all areas and in particular with their stakeholders. LHP had given a commitment when it had merged with Shoreline of Grimsby five years previously, that it would maintain and enhance its' presence in Boston and the villages. LHP still ran all services in Boston, from Boston and employed over 100 staff who lived and worked in the areas. Ongo's heritage and ethos was very similar to that of LHP with them being responsible to North Lincolnshire Council as LHP were responsible to Boston Borough Council and intended to remain so.

The reasons for consideration of the merger included the opportunity of providing size and resilience at a far higher level than possible when the organisation stands alone. It would provide efficiencies that would go back into the communities and as a charity, with no shareholders, no money would be leaving the system. Both companies were committed to place and both involved and working with their Council colleagues in areas of ASB, regeneration and environmental issues.

Should the merger go ahead then savings could be invested back into areas including repairs and using the systems Ongo currently had in place, including video diagnostics in their properties enabling instant viewing of a problem and the ability to provide advice direct to the tenant in respect of the issue. The merger would also enable LHP to bring more maintenance in-house in areas such as roofing, and with a view to providing apprenticeships across a range of maintenance skill sets moving forward.

One key area of concern remained the state of neighbourhoods and the fact that whilst houses were created and turned into homes, if the neighbourhood was not clean and tidy, people did not feel confident to thrive. LHP continued to undertake preventative work with partners daily to stop issues escalating.

Ongo had formed their own charitable foundation with £1mil per year going into various communities. It was an act LHP would hope to emulate as it enabled them to undertake actions that a landlord could not, with Ongo having built a community centre and supported the running of a local post office, each providing and supporting a key community asset.

A wide number of consultation streams for the potential merger would be running through to Christmas Time including stakeholders / partners and tenants.

Members questioning followed with responses provided when possible and is collated and included:

In response to a question seeking clarification on the onus of responsibility for grounds maintenance, which included excessive plant growth covering existing fences, members were advised that the grounds maintenance contract did not include clearance of over growth plants but only the cutting of grass. Referencing concerns noted as the amount of grass cuts per annum and the quality of the cut provided, members were advised that there was a charge for tenants for the service and any extension to the contract to provide additional cuts would require an increase to that charge. In relation to the quality of the cut members were advised that management of the contractors had slipped and a performance notice had been served, resulting in the contractors having a more robust approach and LHP's own team now oversaw delivery of the service. Members were further advised that with the right to buy exercised by tenants, LEP had taken the decision not to penalise those who chose to stay as tenants, and as such had picked up the costs for the grass cutting service from those who bought their property. Responding to a suggestion that gardens which were overgrown due to elderly residents being unable to maintain them could be rented out for allotments, members were advised that LHP would look to address the issue with the resident and would not want to remove a garden from anybody. A further suggestion of turning such a garden into a driveway was also urged caution on, as such a move would require permission with LCC and incur costs to their adopted highway standards.

Members were further advised that a programme was being implemented to review the quality of fencing across all sites with LHP committed to renew decaying wooden fencing where needed.

Members were encouraged to attend the site visits / walkabouts carried out across the various sites and advised that an action plan was formulated from the outcomes of each site visit and monitored to ensure the issues highlighted were addressed.

Responding to concerns about a potential reduction on spend or presence for one partner should the merger go ahead, members were advised there would be no percentage spend, each partner would retain its sovereignty and the scheme would be fair and equitable allowing either partner to be accorded in-depth spend at a time of need. Members were further advised that Ongo would enable greater capacity looking forward for development having a large existing development programme.

Having raised a concern at the lack of residents on the board for LHP, members were advised that there was no requirement for resident board members and it was a rare practice across the sector. However, the members on the board for LHP was very diverse and also was very skilled with a wide range of expertise to support the organisation. LHP had developed and launched a trainee board member programme, and had recruited a customer to sit on the operations committee to provide an insight in all complaints and issues the committee dealt with. Addressing comments in respect of customer engagement, members were advised that moving forward all customers were consulted at the draft stage of any strategy prior to any approval, to ensure the final document was compiled to their expectations and in a comprehensible format. Moving forward it was the organisations intention to take a more holistic approach and not, as previously, simply signpost customers. The 'Your Voice' platform which was a digital platform to engage customers had also been successfully launched.

Other suggestions from members included using BBC CCTV on the various sites to assist with ASB activity, providing QR Codes for reporting incidents quicker and also possible use of augmented diagnostics.

Appreciation was noted by a number of members at the speed with which their enquiries were responded to via the direct member line, with the promptness of the reply allowing them to respond to the residents.

Concluding the Chairman thanked all three of the representatives from LHP for their attendance and for the information they had provided and the reassurances and response they had given to the committee.

It is noted that certain individual residences / areas of concern were noted which would be addressed directly with the relevant ward member following the meeting.

9 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 an economic and social hub for the Borough of Boston. Importantly it is a sub-regional retail centre 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 covered 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 committed 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 centre 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 centre 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 centre comprised of 52 hectares and with changes to the retail sector and shopping habits, its role as a retail centre 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 centre, 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 centre 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

The Chairman noted that he was aware the same report had been tabled a week earlier at a Scrutiny meeting, but not all members of BTAC had been involved at the meeting and as such, their comments were welcomed to the consultation.

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 visitor 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 vinyls 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 was a 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 market's development plan was being 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 offer. 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.

10 WORK PROGRAMME - STANDING ITEM

Members note the work programme.

The Meeting ended at 8.30 pm