



Post Covid 19: Recovery in North Kesteven

NK Independent Group

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Foreword

Covid has made so many of us rethink what is important in life and how a planned recovery from the personal, social and economic impact from Covid 19 can deliver prosperity whilst delivering additional benefits to our communities and environment.

Changes in the digital revolution and the need to better protect our environment have both accelerated, affecting the way we recreate our future. More of the same is not an option.

The NK Independent Group at North Kesteven District Council has eighteen elected District Councillors who have together carefully considered how best North Kesteven can focus efforts on a recovery that is inclusive and works towards a better future.

Councillors have read widely and taken part in both local and many wider national, county and international discussions. We have attempted to draw on this to make what we hope is a useful contribution to discussions and help shape North Kesteven in years to come.

Thanks to the Councillor Working Group, led by Cllr Peter Lundgren, to the NK Independent Group for their significant contributions and to the many who contributed their thoughts and background material.

Cllr Marianne Overton MBE
Leader of the NK Independent Group

Cllr Peter Lundgren
Leader of the Recovery Working Group
Robert Oates, David Suiter, Jordan Moran, Richard Johnston

Post Covid 19: Recovery in North Kesteven

Contribution from the NK Independent Group (Lincolnshire Independents and Independents)

Introduction

The impact of Covid 19 on our daily lives has made many of us rethink what is important in life. Nationally, being under lockdown, not dissimilar for many to being under house arrest, has reduced the spread of Covid 19 but at a cost to our communities and economy.

Locally, the impact of Covid 19 on our district has been severe affecting individuals and businesses on a personal, social and economic level.

The personal cost has been dire. Even with financial support for business and jobs from national and local government the cost to the individual varies, but include the loss of loved ones and missed family members; increased issues with mental health, addiction, domestic violence; loss of access to the full range of medicine and dentistry; loss of income and good employment. The Covid 19 crisis has also highlighted the precarious financial and health situation of many of our more vulnerable residents.

The economic impact on businesses and employment across our district is just being understood. Even with the significant and welcome support for retail, businesses and jobs from central government and local councils North Kesteven has seen a 112% increase in unemployment between January and March (albeit from a historically low figure), with unemployment numbers sadly expected to increase. A number of businesses, including high profile businesses, have announced they will be rationalising their operations, and some have sadly closed. After the lockdown was announced on the 23rd March the impact on non-essential retail outlets and the hospitality sector is still unknown but this sector is anticipated to be amongst the worst affected with growing concerns about the future viability of our retail high streets

Our council has lost significant income streams whilst bearing the cost of increasing the level of services it provides within our communities. The financial support from central government for our district council is very welcome but it is likely our council will face a significant shortfall in income this year, with significant financial challenges going into the future.

Considering the long-term impact, it is considered that our young people could be the biggest losers. They have already suffered 10 years of austerity since the banking crash of 2008, now recent unemployment figures suggest the 18 to 24 year olds are the worst affected by job losses and many 18 to 24 year olds could face further years of economic hardship, lower job opportunities and difficulty purchasing a home.

Whilst the negative impact of Covid 19 cannot be overstated – especially in terms of economy and employment - there have notably been some examples of benefits in our communities and our environment.

Our communities have risen to the challenge of Covid 19 with volunteer groups forming to support those self-isolating and the most vulnerable in our communities. A few months ago, many believed community spirit was

a thing of the past, but the positive response in our communities proves that community spirit is alive but in need of some encouragement and support.

Aspects of our environment have benefitted. Following the lockdown and the consequential significant reduction in vehicle movements, people noted the improvement in air quality and the reduction in noise from traffic and aircraft. People also noted the increased incidence of wildlife in our communities.

Many people have commented that following the sudden change in work practices, with increased incidence of working from home, their health and wellbeing has improved. In particular, the reduction in the stress of commuting to work on congested highways or public transport systems has been noted.

The sudden changes forced upon our society to address the threat and spread of the disease has made many of us reassess what is important in life and the quality of life.

Those contributing to this document believe the future role for North Kesteven District Council, working with its partners, is a balance of supporting economic recovery from Covid 19 whilst locking-in the social and environmental gains made during the Covid 19 crisis to develop a healthier, sustainable and more equitable society.

To lose those benefits, gained at such a cost to individuals and businesses, would only increase the overall negative impact of Covid 19 on our communities, our economy and our environment.

Recovery

As we consider life after the initial Covid 19 crisis and move out of the crisis stage into the recovery stage this is a golden opportunity to think about how we can create a more sustainable lifestyle within our district, along with strong communities and growing local economies?

The following breaks down the response and recovery from Covid 19 into economy, community and environment to mirror the Council's own Priorities, however it should be noted that economy, community and environment are in reality inextricably interlinked and should be considered as a whole.

Economy

Business and jobs

Almost half the working population worked from home during the lockdown, saving themselves time and money, as well as reducing congestion on our roads and public transport system. Supporting those wanting to work from home more in the future has real benefits for the environment and for individual wellbeing whilst reducing pressure on our inadequate road and public transport systems.

Along with those now working from home it is recognised North Kesteven has a significant number of small and micro businesses operating successfully in our communities. Small businesses typically employing less than ten people, form the backbone of our employment and job creation in North Kesteven.

However, people working from home or running small businesses from home need easily accessible business facilities and support.

Supporting the decentralised economy

Initiatives to improve connectivity should be strengthened for all our businesses as it is an obvious requirement for small businesses and home workers, especially in a rural district like North Kesteven. We need to support those working within our rural communities. For example, targeted business advice has been increased through this difficult period and will need to be continued and even increased.

It is proposed that a network of local business hubs providing small business owners and those working from home access to business facilities such as meeting rooms, secretarial services etc would support the growing numbers of individuals and small businesses working within our communities. There is also a potential to incorporate business hubs strategically into existing council operated facilities such as local light industrial parks, as at Metherringham and Bracebridge Heath, or the proposed digital hubs that replace the community outreach offices with the opportunity to charge for the service.

Hospitality and retail sectors

Hospitality and retail are potentially the worst affected sectors of our economy. To supplement the central government grants supporting this sector through the worst of the Covid 19 crisis the council might consider a range of initiatives such as the promotion of 'staycation' opportunities to bring/retain money in our local economy; to promote a café culture in our towns and villages with the temporary closure of roads (possibly in the evening and/or weekends) to allow customers and consumers to fully enjoy our retail and al fresco hospitality areas.

Improved access to our retail and hospitality areas. Upgrades to District Council-managed car parks to allow cashless payment is welcomed. Ways of easing access to our retail and hospitality sector should be considered as a major factor in assisting the recovery in our town and village centres.

Community

Community response to Covid 19

North Kesteven District Council along with partners has played an important role in supporting our communities to respond at a local level to the needs of vulnerable people in the community. Some community response groups already existed in the form of emergency plan groups, but many community volunteer groups were formed as a direct response to the threat of Covid 19. The work of these community groups has been fundamental to delivering basic services and support to vulnerable people on a scale that cannot be achieved by local government resources working alone. It is also important to note that a significant number of the people supported by community groups were not suffering directly from Covid 19 but that Covid 19 has exposed gaps and vulnerabilities in our current support structure, particularly in relation to those experiencing mental health issues.

Moving forward North Kesteven District Council has a crucial role in retaining, supporting and regulating community volunteer groups in readiness for another crisis and to support the existing Wellbeing teams and similar initiatives.

Looking at the available models for retaining and supporting volunteer groups in our communities establishing an emergency plan group in each community may not be the best solution for another Covid 19 type crisis; however the Good Neighbours Scheme supported by Community Lincs and YMCA Lincs looks to be a potential vehicle. Alongside a volunteer community response there is a need for co-ordinated facilities across our district, such as food banks, to address the immediate basic needs of vulnerable people in a crisis.

Looking to the future and in order to achieve a co-ordinated community response to a similar crisis North Kesteven District Council should be investing in and resourcing the Wellbeing service to initiate, support and regulate the establishment of community groups throughout the district.

Inter-community connectivity

The response to Covid 19 has highlighted the need for inter-connectivity between communities both in terms of sustainable travel and in terms of community liaison and support. North Kesteven District Council has a role in assisting the development of these physical and interpersonal links that will assist clusters of communities to develop a resilient culture of mutual support in readiness of a future crisis.

Health support

Covid 19 has seen marked changes to the way those with physical and mental health issues are supported within our communities. Covid 19 has also highlighted the vulnerability of some of these people to a crisis. The instigation of a Good Neighbour Scheme to supplement the work of Wellbeing and other local government agencies will go a long way to improve the situation for the most vulnerable in our communities.

Whilst on health issues the Covid 19 crisis highlighted a lack of retained information identifying the most vulnerable in our communities leading to delays in NK and its partners being able to provide assistance to vulnerable people and increasing the workload of council staff.

Homelessness

The immediate response to the threat of Covid 19 saw a co-ordinated and immediate solution to homelessness – albeit a temporary solution. Its notable that our national five year plan to assist homeless people into suitable accommodation was achieved within a few days and whilst its accepted that some homeless people have struggled with the accommodation provided, its important to capitalise on the gains made in addressing homelessness in our district and turning the current temporary solution into a long term solution.

Environment

The Covid crisis and the associated lockdown changing the way we all live and work demonstrated the environmental gains (particularly green house gas emissions and climate change) that could be achieved with a significant change in how we all live, work and travel.

The lockdown fundamentally changed the way many of us travel for domestic and work reasons with a corresponding change in domestic and business consumption of power, and a dramatic reduction in the use of private cars.

Nationally no coal was used to generate electricity during May with significant benefits in terms of greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere and a noticeable improvement in air quality.

The improvement in air quality, noise pollution, wellbeing and personal health was almost immediately felt and commented upon by many residents.

Public recognition of the benefits from reducing fossil fuel use will hopefully translate into changing life-work practices and a demand for alternatives to fossil fuel vehicles and the daily commute to work.

There is a huge challenge nationally and globally to address climate change and the negative affects on our environment from human activity; but, so often, positive change at an individual level can only come where credible local alternatives are readily available.

Our council already has a strong track record on environmental issues with the development of the Our Environment strategy, the motion passed in support of United Nations 17 sustainability goals and climate change, and several local schemes generating renewable energy.

For our district there is an opportunity to build on and supplement these policies with provision for alternative transport solutions and providing the infrastructure needed to make those alternatives more attractive.

There are many potential opportunities but, for instance, promoting cycling throughout the district through providing a network of cycle friendly routes (not necessarily bespoke cycle routes) throughout the district that will link community to community, community to workplaces, and urban centre to urban centre whilst providing charging points for electric bikes would go a long way to promote sustainable transport practices.

The lockdown of society for twelve weeks exposed the need for good quality green space to be accessible to everyone for healthy outdoor activity and to benefit both their physical and mental wellbeing. North Kesteven District Council is well placed to improve and increase the green space in the district and should set itself an ambitious target to do so as part of a new and improved Environment and Climate Change Strategy.

As the review of our Local Plan progresses there will be opportunities to incorporate some of these environmental initiatives into our planning process making our new homes and growing communities healthier, better connected and more sustainable.

Conclusion

Recovery from the impact of Covid 19 will be a challenge at all levels of government but this document focusses on those elements of the economic, social, and environmental recovery that are within the remit of a district council like North Kesteven working with its partners to deliver meaningful change and benefits within the communities served by North Kesteven District Council.

North Kesteven has demonstrated its leadership and support for our communities during the Covid crisis and has worked with its partners to support our communities and businesses. It has recognised that the crisis continues and that a second wave is a possibility, but it is important to plan for recovery and the future in the longer term.

Covid has made so many of us rethink what is important in life and how a planned recovery from the personal, social and economic impact from Covid 19 can deliver prosperity whilst delivering additional benefits to our communities and environment.

North Kesteven District Council is fortunate to be in a strong position to address recovery post covid with a strong core of officers and a dented but stable financial position. Its anticipated that many of the benefits identified could be delivered without the need for ambitious spending plans nor significant policy changes; and hopefully could be delivered within existing budgets and using existing resources.