Responses to COVID-19 in fenland communities:
Reflections from the Social Issues in South Lincolnshire Network

2023

UNIVERSITY OF
LINCOLN
LINCOLN INTERNATIONAL
BUSINESS SCHOOL

East Coast
Community Fund

GrantScape
The Experts in Community Fund Management

Contacts

Fr Jonathan Sibley, (Coordinator) Social Issues in South Lincolnshire Network
St Mary's Church, Market Place, Long Sutton, Spalding, Lincs PE12 9JJ

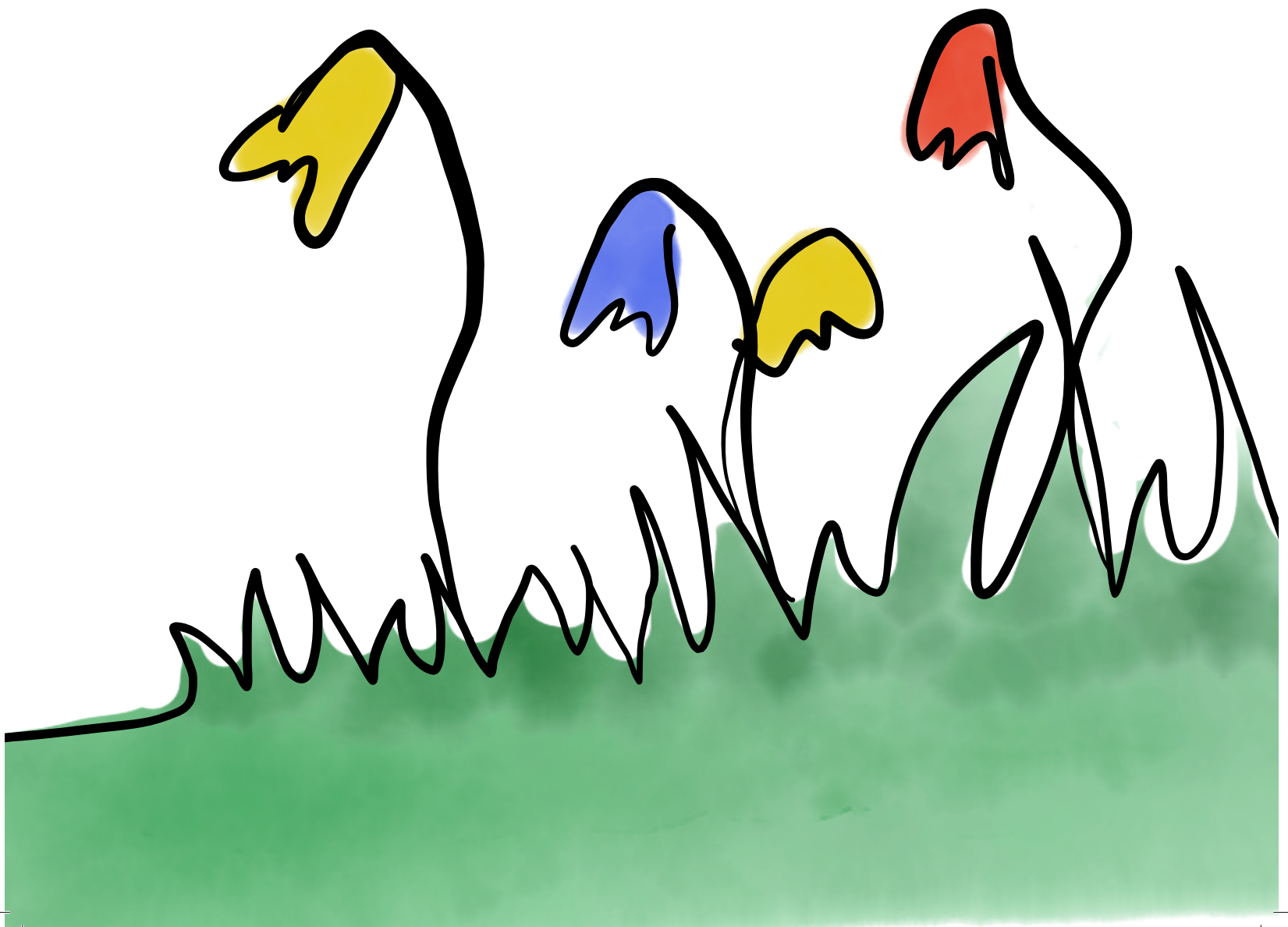https://www.facebook.com/SocialIssuesInSouthLincolnshire

Dr Rebecca Herron, Associate Professor (Community Operational Research Unit)
Lincoln International Business School, The University of Lincoln

rherron@lincoln.ac.uk

Acknowledgments

Foreword

Welcome to this report by the *Social Issues in South Lincolnshire* network about the impact of COVID-19 within our fenland communities.

The long-term effect of this virus and its long-term impact on our communities in Lincolnshire have been considerable. The conversations facilitated by our network are also an attempt to continue to learn from this, and to recognise resources for the future that may support our county's welfare.

This report was produced whilst working within the parameters required by the pandemic and the limiting constraints of this virulent disease. It was fortunate that the comprehensiveness of current technology meant that much of the data and interpersonal interaction and testimonies could still be captured and recorded during this time. Over the summer of 2020 and onwards through 2021 and the spring of 2022 much of the information presented here was contributed and shared through online meetings (workshops) and discussions. The task of reflecting on this period has involved a large number of different contributors, some of whom are still recovering (and in some cases still suffering) from the effects of COVID.

Our condolences and prayers are for those friends, family and colleagues who suffered the ultimate loss. Our thanks go to the vast numbers of staff within the NHS who gave their all; many of whom still affected by the experience. A huge thank you to everyone who has travelled with us on this journey - too many to mention adequately but all appreciated.

We hope we have, and still are, learning from these unprecedented experiences. There has been an awe-inspiring magnitude of new understanding and growing work with mental health and well-being groups developing across the county and country. Support is occurring at different levels of need and structures to facilitate and root the new nature of society are emerging. We do also need to recognise the vulnerable dichotomy of sacrificial volunteering and institutional burnout which so many have experienced.

Many thanks go to Laura Farrell and the East Coast Community Fund (GrantScape) for their commitment to making this publication possible and to Katy Gale and others at LCVS (Lincolnshire Community & Voluntary Service) who helped to make our online workshops run so smoothly as well as to all the participants who shared their experiences and insights so generously. Thank you to key people who have enabled the positive progress of this significant report - to Laura Farrell, David Fannin, Professor Richard Parish, Sir John Hayes, the Rev Dr Rowan Williams, Jeanne Sibley, and to Dr Becky Herron, Associate Professor of The University of Lincoln Business School (CORU) without whom little of this material would have been possible to achieve.

A tremendous thank you to for everyone who has championed the whole progress and course of Social Justice in Lincolnshire communities and wider afield, for over a decade. Thank you to Rev Dr Tim Ellis who shared some initial thoughts with me for the need of a forum of this nature at the beginning of this Millennium. The impetus for this has grown ever since.

Humbly and quietly a huge thank you as we have all progressed in joint pilgrimage.
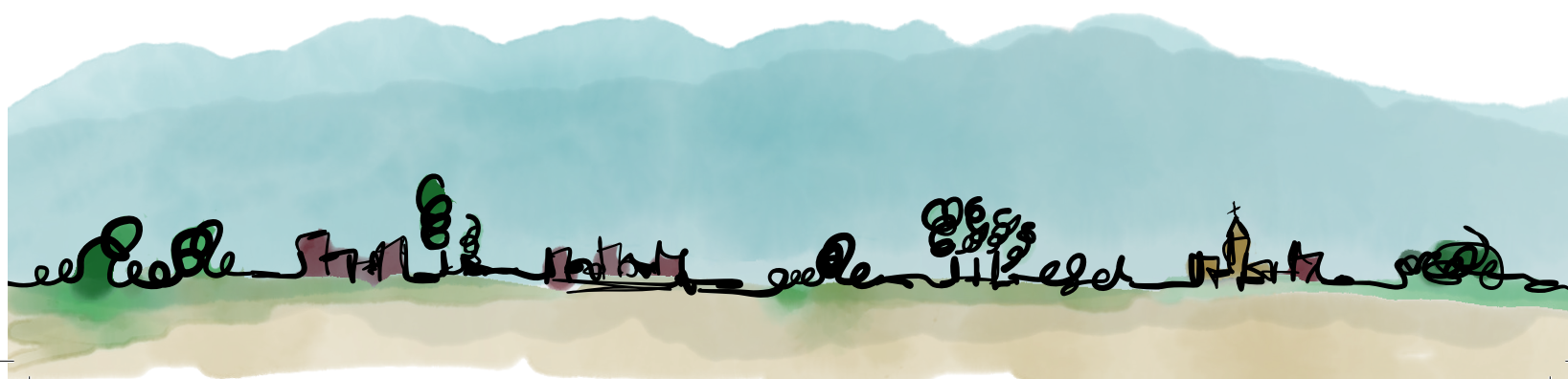
Fr Jonathan Sibley

Vicar of St Marys Long Sutton

Coordinator of Social Issues in South Lincolnshire

June 2023

Table of Contents

Background to this report

The *Social Issues in South Lincolnshire* network is a community-led forum that brings together interested parties on a regular basis to identify and discuss the current social issues that affect the fenland area of South Lincolnshire and the communities that live there.

It was an initiative started in 2011 by a local Church of England minister, Father Jonathan Sibley of St. Mary's Church Long Sutton and supported by the University of Lincoln's Community Operational Research Unit (CORU) and other members of the Steering Group. The network has met regularly since its inception, at least twice a year, and invites local and national speakers to share their knowledge and views on issues of shared concern. It has involved the regular participation of Public Sector organisations and individuals (including NHS, Police, Social Services, schools, Local Government, Councillors and the local Member of Parliament), Third Sector organisations (Individual charities, infrastructure organisations, volunteers and churches), Private Sector organisations, residents as well as some regular visitors to the area. In recent years the network has discussed issues surrounding health and social care, the impacts of Brexit, planning and the environment, transport and many other issues of direct importance to the residents of Long Sutton / Holbeach and the surrounding fenland communities.

Through online meetings in 2021 we were able to continue to meet to discuss the responses and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic within local communities, individuals and organisations. This report seeks to highlight some of the issues identified by the network during these conversations as well as celebrating some of the many responses to these issues that people and organisations were able to generate. The Network meetings sought to be forward-looking to see how these experiences are shaping the way people are operating their activities currently, their expectations for the future and how participants want to work and live in the future.

This report does not seek to be exhaustive – there was just too much activity undertaken by all organisations in 2020 and 2021 to be able to capture it all. It does not even try to capture everything discussed in the two network meetings - as this would be too long a report to serve the intended purpose here. More information can be found on this in summaries of each individual Network meeting.

What this report *does* intend to do though is to produce examples and explore some specific themes developed through these conversations. The information provided in this report is based on the conversations developed through the network meetings. We have made every effort to be representative of ideas captured in this process and hope that those participating in the Network and others reading this report will find this a helpful reflection on the social issues present in such rural communities and the ways that these communities have been supported during such challenging times.

Community responses during COVID-19

We start this report with a brief review of some of the community responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic that network members identified during the forum meetings. This summary is only indicative of the vast energy and effort exerted by community members and organisations during this period and whilst we acknowledge it only outlines some activity, we hope this initial review helps to set the scene of the activity generated during this time to meet very real and pressing human needs.

Supporting the NHS (Community responses)

The COVID pandemic has highlighted to everyone the central role the NHS plays within our communities. It is beyond the scope of this report to discuss the implications of the pandemic for the NHS – However what our Network discussions illustrated was the important work that the NHS has been doing in terms of Mental Health support and in terms of designing the future of the service. Combined with the emergency response to COVID and existing and ongoing need, the scale of the challenge is clear. What our discussions within the Social Issues Network also highlight are the connections that the NHS are building with others in delivering services locally for supporting physical and mental health in rural communities. During the pandemic this partnership included community responses to help residents to physically get to health settings, supporting residents so they could leave their homes when needed (e.g. when hospitalised) and supporting vaccination programmes. It has also involved the NHS/infrastructure organisations identifying community organisations that can be part of a wider social prescribing system (directly providing prescribed treatments in new forms – particularly for conditions related to wellbeing and social isolation) and supporting NHS mental health services as well as providing alternative sources of community support for wellbeing. The response to the pandemic has involved local and regional effort to organise large numbers of volunteers in many different ways, for example in delivering medicines and supporting vaccination centres. The work of Good Neighbour schemes and the Volunteer Bureau was highlighted in this. The importance of wider community engagement in the longer term planning and delivery of NHS services was noted. (The Social Issues Network itself was also acknowledged to be a valuable additional means to identify and connect to community-level organisations and individuals at a local level and to access people with connections into the wider fenland communities).

Supporting isolating residents (Emergency responses)

The local district council (South Holland District Council) and Third Sector organisations played a vital role in the provision of emergency responses in the pandemic. Whilst the NHS responded to medical needs in the community and the acute needs of COVID patients needing clinical care, much of the community response involved supporting COVID-infected or COVID-isolated residents in their own homes. Without this local support the local GP/NHS systems would have been put under considerable extra strain. Council workers and volunteers (including Good Neighbour schemes and the Volunteer Bureau) contacted isolating residents and provided acute emergency support such as delivering prescription medicines to isolated residents and ensuring access to other fundamentals such as food deliveries[1].

---

1   See previous reports from the Social Network for more information on the scale of this activity.

Financial support (Delivering support and providing advice)

The District Council and Third Sector also provided essential financial assistance for residents – both in terms of direct delivery of government support schemes and the provision of advice. Many local residents were found to be in need of financial support during periods of furlough, unexpected redundancy or sudden changes of income for the self-employed. As well as providing support to help residents understand and access the new government support schemes, Public Sector and community organisations played an important role in supporting the wellbeing of local residents during this period. Some residents were found not to be eligible for funding under the existing scheme rules, but these were supported if possible and advised where they might access further help and support.

Practical support (Food Bank and Larder and befriending)

COVID 19 created new needs within rural fenland communities. One of the most evident of these was the need to support many residents with fundamental everyday needs such as food and essential items. The Social Issues Network provided a direct response to this by developing a local Food Bank and Larder. Other community organisations in the network also provided essential support including the development of new Good Neighbours groups, increased levels of volunteers through the Volunteer Bureau and overall many families were supported.

Support for children and their families

The support for the community was also very evident in local schools. Schools took on new roles within the community during the lockdowns and across the whole COVID pandemic. These functions went beyond traditional views of education and involved providing more general support for children and their families. The needs in the community created by the pandemic extended the remit of the school - such as encouraging parents to access the Food Banks and Larder. The role of social media (negative and positive) was highlighted within Network discussions. Schools found themselves supporting families and children with challenging home-learning situations, and finding new ways to try to address this, including providing access to IT equipment. The primary school also noted that there was a new need for supporting the many parents who found home-schooling and lockdowns very difficult. Work within the local primary school has since been formalised by a new staff post. The pandemic emphasised to all the role of education to support the whole child including their support structures (families and communities) and highlighted the importance of children learning many life-skills at school (such as creative play) as well as academic ones.

Social issues highlighted in rural communities

All the above has highlighted a range of social issues in our rural communities. Some of these are shared by urban communities but many have their own unique aspects in rural, fenland communities. These issues include:

Access to food and essentials

Perhaps ironically in a region of the country known for producing a large proportion of the UK's food (and where much employment focusses around horticulture, agriculture and food-processing) there has been considerable evidence that many residents found getting food and other essentials

problematic. This included having sufficient money for buying appropriate food (many of these residents were on low incomes or experienced rapid changes of circumstances during the pandemic) but also because of the distances involved, access to supermarkets and isolation was an important factor. The COVID pandemic demonstrated a real demand for essential food-related provision in rural fenland communities.

Transport/isolation

This fenland area of the UK is characterised by small towns, distributed villages and isolated housing. Public transport is limited and infrequent and many people do not have any access to regular bus or train services. Many families rely on cars to access local facilities. As an area with an aging population this can cause additional challenges for accessing local facilities e.g. shopping, banks and medical services. Transport services run by the District Council and local volunteers provide important resources in response to these transport issues in rural communities.

Digital isolation and connectivity

Along with physical isolation, COVID has also highlighted the number of people living in digital isolation. The move across the UK to online shopping, online access to public services and online banking has been accelerated by the pandemic but in rural communities this can compound challenges for people with poor access to digital services (poor connectivity, lack of equipment or lack of digital knowledge) as well the challenges of making online services truly accessible to an aging population who may not have the technology or the digital skills required. Whilst many people have found new ways in recent years to connect online with families, friends and organisations (during and after the lockdowns), it must be recognised that many people do not have this technology and find themselves doubly-isolated as others moved many aspects of daily life online in response to the pandemic.

New ways of working: Disruption and adaptation

Discussions within the network also highlighted how the experience of living through the COVID crisis has created new ways of working.

Public Sector - Local Authorities / NHS / Schools

All public organisations participating discussed their key roles in terms of supporting communities and residents. Whilst this has always been at the heart of the work of these organisations, it seems apparent that the direct relationship with the local community has been reinforced by the need to find new ways to meet unexpected and urgent needs during the pandemic. In particular, all organisations reported finding new ways to work with other organisations and individuals, to pool resources and to sometimes move beyond their traditional roles to find ways to provide support individuals and communities in evident crisis. For example, the local primary school talked about the increased cross-over they experienced with family support and mental health support work and working with Foodbanks. The NHS also discussed how it is working more closely with community organisations as it plans and develops services for the future. This enhanced fluidity between organisations is developing as each organisation understands better the priorities, resources (and limitations) of the others around it and the willingness to discuss ways of addressing social issues together.

Churches

local churches have been part of the Social Issues Network since the outset of the forum. Many members of these churches have been involved with network discussions. One feature of these discussions has been the interest in developing connections and activities that go beyond the churches and to see how community resources within churches (including people, active community groups and buildings) can link to wider social needs and responses such as Social Prescribing. Much of this work has been ongoing for a long time but these new ways of looking at how the work of parishes can link to the priorities of other partners in the community appears to be very valuable.

Emergency Planning Teams

The responses of the community to COVID 19 have naturally involved the activity of people already involved in emergency planning in the locality. However, the experience of actively dealing with the pandemic has brought these local planning teams into closer contact with emergency responders at a regional level and National Level. The importance of being able to connect national emergency planning to very local networks was emphasised within the Social Issues Network discussions. It is hoped that this connection should enable more flexibility to quickly adapt to new emergency circumstances as they arise in the future – using local knowledge and established networks to quickly identify people and resources that might be needed in another emergency (see Appendix 1 for further discussion).

Building stronger global systems in response: Social, Ethical, Planet

All this was seen against a backdrop of a larger National conversation discussing the new normal. The discussions in the second workshop reflected on how local experiences help shape a wider, more global discussion. This was framed around 3 domains: Social, Ethical and Planetary considerations.

Social

In general terms, speakers at the time of the meetings remained reasonably positive about the overall impact of the pandemic on the economy in the UK. It was felt that the economy would likely 'act like a spring' and return back from this shock but that the nature of the disruption would cause some individual businesses to fail while others would become more successful. The effect on the housing market and the high street was anticipated to lead to some difficulties nationally; especially for younger people entering the housing market and for some high street stores trying to remain viable. It was noted that the disruption caused by the pandemic also disrupted our education systems (Primary, Secondary and Higher Education) and in doing so raised important questions for the Network about the role of education and the extent to which we are questioning the reproduction of old ideas and taking the opportunity to develop education systems more in-tune with our current values and the needs for the future. A further discussion identified the view of many that there is a tendency for political/collective decisions to be of a too short-term nature and lacking inter-connection to wider issues. There was a recognition from Network participants of the need to support the continual renewal of civic society and democratic process and to reflect together on how we develop politics and institutions able to take a longer term view and to connect to global social issues in a meaningful way.

Ethical

It was felt that the pandemic had emphasised to many the core things they personally and collectively valued. For many taking part in this network, it had highlighted the importance of relationships and the support-systems around people (families or friends/organisations). It also highlighted a need for many to feel connected and valued by others. The importance of arts and leisure, mental wellbeing and the non-economic dimensions of life have been underscored by the experiences of lock-down. At the same time fundamental needs such as ability to access food and housing are also emphasised along with the importance of maintaining human dignity. The nuances of these issues are part of an ongoing discussion, but the network highlighted that the more abstract issues (such as values and human dignity) are also important social issues that need to be discussed alongside practical ones.

Planet

In light of all this, the network has raised and discussed a number of global issues. These include discussions about how to create a more sustainable economy against this background. Sustainable in terms of ecology (how to promote a genuinely greener economy); sustainable in terms of balancing a focus on economic growth with other considerations; and sustainable in terms of sustaining meaningful possibilities for work and recognising the importance of dignified human experience. The ever-increasing interconnection of local and global issues was noted and the need to recognise that some issues (such as flooding) would not be solved in isolation from larger more international conversations (such as climate and pollution). The question remains for fenland communities, and for this network, how local communities can best link to these conversations; feeding in their distinct experiences to inform decision making and also learning from national and international perspectives.

It was felt that there is scope for taking part in a wider national conversation on all of these issues. How are different rural communities going to adapt? (and to mitigate the impacts of their actions)? How can we respond to ever increasing international interconnectivity and to address issues that span local and national boundaries? How do we start to develop truly global solutions to future issues and how can a rural community in fenland Lincolnshire be a meaningful part of this process?

Is this the new normal?

Whilst this whole report addresses some of the implications of COVID in the Lincolnshire fenland communities, like many others at this time we have also been trying to reflect on which of these aspects indicate changes that may reflect a new reality going forward – either for the duration of this current situation, or in some cases longer term changes, triggered by the pandemic, that may never resettle back to the older patterns afterwards. Some changes might become permanent - because they have simply become too deeply established for people to notice (or reverse) them [for example moving towards an online or cashless society]. It may be there are not sufficient resources to return to all the old ways or it might be because the new ways are in fact preferred in some way. Whilst no-one has access to any kind of reliable crystal ball for all this, sharing experiences and reflecting on these within the network has been a useful exercise going forward to discuss what might be changing for the future for the area...

New economic realities and ways of working

COVID-19 has had a massive impact on the way many people work and how businesses and organisations operate. The question we are reflecting on here are which of these changes are likely to persist *beyond* the current time? The increase in online business and online retail is already an accepted new normal generally in the UK (and with it a shift to a more cashless society and some changes on our High Streets). Other economic impacts discussed during our meetings include higher house prices nationally (and the challenges of affordable housing this may bring, especially for young people) and high levels of borrowing. Many businesses have experienced staffing shortages and locally this is likely to remain an ongoing concern, particularly for picking and packing businesses in the food sector. The interrelated nature of social and economic issues has also been highlighted by the pandemic: highlighting, for example, the importance of schools for the economy (not just for training the next generation; but more immediately for supporting the current workforce who have children). It seems reasonable to expect that the new normal will include higher levels of home-working for some and less business-related travel as people continue to use the online methods to meet and work developed during lockdowns. The need for digital infrastructure is therefore almost certainly going to be a new normal, for businesses but also for residents of all ages (to be able to access everyday services increasingly delivered online - such as retail, council services, banking and education). New forms of (digital) isolation for less affluent and older people has been highlighted within our meetings and the need to address this (or mitigate its effects) seems likely to become a new normal for work with people in the area. Another important new normal for the community is an increased opportunity to connect to people and organisations outside the area and to bring people to meetings without the long journeys often previously involved (this effect has already been evident within our own Network meetings – evidenced by the presence of national figures). Perhaps though, the general move to more online working is likely to mean people may now value and use their social time in different ways – at work and in general.

Changes within Education

Reflections from the local primary school suggested that many younger children are quite resilient in terms of their academic education and the general feeling was that local schools and children (at least the younger ones) would find appropriate ways to catch up on much of their lost academic learning. It was in other, more social, areas of Primary education where COVID-19 had highlighted new changes for schools. One fundamental change was the need to support and help facilitate remote (home) education during lockdown. This included several associated changes, some of which might conceivably remain as part of the new normal in some form. Firstly, it involved schools with considerations about the working environments children can access at home (including hardware, software and connectivity). Schools were for example involved in distributing IT equipment to families and supporting its use. Secondly, in the course of lockdown some of the distinctions between school and home were necessarily 'blurred', with parents being asked to facilitate home-schooling. This highlighted tensions this can cause some families and the differences between home-learning environments for many children. Whilst it is expected that much will return to a pre-COVID state within schools eventually, some of these experiences may shape the future. It does appear likely for example that the expectation that children and young people are able to access digital resources at home will remain as part of a new normal across education in the UK. For those that do not have resources for doing online schoolwork at home (space/time, technology, connectivity, learning support or a suitable space to study) this new normal

is in danger of increasing differences in educational experiences for children. This new normal will therefore require providers to keep aware of the need to address these new forms of inequality. A further likely feature of the new normal is that education providers might well be expected to maintain a wider role in the wellbeing of their children. Whilst always central in education, COVID-19 has highlighted the unique role that schools can play in providing support for children (and their families) and it is likely that many schools continue to review what they value and the balance between developing traditional academic skills and a whole range of other aspects that have been re-emphasised as important during the pandemic (e.g. the importance of social relationships, creative play and supporting the development of secure and happy individuals able to learn more widely).

Health and wellbeing and the importance of the Voluntary Sector

The National Health Service (NHS) has been a vital part of UK life since its inception, however COVID-19 has taken the National awareness of this institution and the central prominence of its work to a new level. New phrases such as "Protecting the NHS" have become embedded in our everyday language and thinking. As Network discussions have illustrated, individuals and organisations across the country have demonstrated that they are prepared to make fundamental changes to their activities (in the short and medium term) in order to help protect a functioning and effective health service and to maintain the wellbeing of themselves and people within their communities. This has been the same in rural communities where the provision of services meets additional challenges of distance and isolation. One of the emergent aspects of the 'new normal' appears to be the importance of *organised/partnered support* provided to the NHS by many organisations – and, in particular, the re-emphasis on the importance of the Voluntary Sector in this respect. From our perspective, the growth in the number (and organisation) of volunteers seems likely to remain a significant part of the new normal, with volunteers and Voluntary Sector organisations helping to support vaccination programmes, to help individuals to receive care and for the provision of essential needs (food and medicines) to those in acute need. It also seems possible that in the new normal the trend will continue of formalising some voluntary sector activity into forms of 'delivery' for the NHS, e.g. social prescribing partnerships, bespoke support worker roles or similar. This will make formal connection into the delivery of NHS outcomes (particularly in the area of mental health and wellbeing support). This appears to be welcomed by many network members as it enables the provision of 'services' at very localised levels in many isolated communities where access to more centralised services was always challenging.

Closing Remarks

In summary, this report finds that local communities created many responses to the social needs created by the COVID 19 epidemic and in doing so served many residents in times of great need. In responding to these immediate needs and reflecting on them collectively, they also highlighted specific ongoing social issues in rural fenland areas. They identified a number of changes resulting from this pandemic and we have used these to suggest some areas for further consideration as the country starts to understand its new normal. What we have not yet anticipated in this we cannot say, but this exercise has already highlighted from our speakers' experiences particular areas for care and consideration going forward.

The ability to create this forum has developed connections between different types of local organisations. Dealing with a complex present – the ability to bring a range of people together to get to know each other and to build capacity in a range of ways helps to be somewhat more prepared for uncertain futures. The ability to reflect, discuss and record the knowledge created in the process is a valuable additional resource for the local community and hopefully more widely.

To get in touch or join the network and receive invitations to future events, please contact:

Fr Jonathan Sibley, Coordinator of Social Issues in South Lincolnshire
c/o St Mary's Church, Market Place, Long Sutton, Spalding, Lincs PE12 9JJ

To find out more, visit the Social Issues in South Lincolnshire Facebook page.

Appendix 1: Preparing for future emergencies in rural communities

By definition, we cannot see what unexpected crisis we might face next, however, given that we have recently been living through challenging times, it is perhaps now easier to imagine the likelihood of future events than previously. The Network discussions have included brief reflections on the nature of likely future emergency events that the local community may need the capacity to cope with in the future. These reflections form part of our collective learning:

Epidemics

The COVID-19 pandemic has arguably been the biggest general epidemic in Britain since the Spanish Flu of the early 20th Century. Britain has been in a fairly stable period in respect to infectious diseases for nearly half a century. However, it seems now likely that we will be living within the shadow of further epidemics for at least the immediate future. The local lessons learnt in terms of responding to periods of lockdown, delivering services in ways likely to reduce infection and lessons about supporting key infrastructure (health, social care, education, food supply etc) should enable us to be better prepared and able to respond still quicker to future events of this

nature (either for this disease or other unrelated epidemics). The key role of supporting volunteering has been recognised in this and given continued/renewed importance in local planning. We have to maintain places to learn (organisationally and individually) from our experiences and to pass this community knowledge on to others.

Flooding/ Climate Crisis

Whilst the need to be prepared to meet the challenges of disease epidemics is very clear to us at the present time it has not blinded people within the Network to other types of crisis that the area might also expect to encounter in the near future. One of these raised by the network is the ongoing risk of flooding in fenland communities. Fortunately, it is recognised that being prepared for one type of emergency (such as an epidemic) also helps with other emergencies such as extreme weather events. An ongoing increased connection to National emergency planning teams has also been part of the discussions of the network in recent meetings.

Financial / Social crisis

The events foreseen by the Network are not limited to disease and floods but discussions covered our ability to respond to a range of humanitarian, social and financial issues. We also reflected on how some global climate emergencies may result in social and financial crisis in several ways. In particular, the potential for social upheaval due to large-scale population movements (or social crisis within other countries). The network also noted that crisis for many older people and low-wage earners of all ages has been a constant source of discussion. We also discussed how financial and social changes are creating local issues. The events of Brexit combined with COVID (and more recently 'the cost of living crisis') have brought their own social and financial changes both for communities and for local businesses and organisations. These include acute concerns in the horticulture/ food industry about attracting and maintaining their workforce in the area and general reflections about migration, community cohesion and human dignity. The responses of financial markets was discussed in some detail. It was recognised that such extreme situations such as the pandemic led to the closure of some businesses but also the success of others. It has stimulated many changes within the way businesses work and many trends that were already starting to emerge before the pandemic (e.g. online shopping and the decline of some businesses) have been rapidly accelerated.

Other events

Whilst some other events might already be imagined within our emergency plans (e.g. major incidents) others might not have been anticipated in our current thinking. However, the general processes of identifying which organisations operate locally, what their resources are and building networks of people who know each other means that the local community will be better prepared to react to any other future shocks or emergencies whatever their nature. Lessons from emergency planning can help both to rebuild and restore communities after this pandemic but also to be better prepared for future events. Participants saw the Network as being one grass-roots source of developing such contacts and a human repository or local knowledge about people, organisations and resources.

Appendix 2: Reflections on the value of the Social Issues Network

The value of the *Social Issues in South Lincolnshire* network to its members has been noted by several participants and is recorded here. It is seen as a place (physical or virtual) to come together and share experiences and knowledge and to reflect with interested others about what issues need to be addressed and how different individuals and organisations can help shape their responses.

Participants have commented that the value of the forum includes:

- It is not a separate organisation with a prescribed objective, but rather it is underpinned by an existing organisation (St Mary's Church) supported by the University of Lincoln - but operating independently from both of these; providing network meetings with the aim of being simply 'for the benefit of those participating'

- The network's goals are therefore only very loosely defined (as per the title "Social Issues in South Lincolnshire") and as such remain flexible to changes in local circumstances. This means that individual speakers and organisations bring to meetings their own concerns and take away a range of information and contacts. This has developed a community-led knowledge of the area over a sustained period of time (10 years) and an emerging and evolving 'self-organised agenda'

- It is an opportunity to network ideas and people – to meet local people and to identify people and organisations who may also have similar interests or have resources that can be connected. This opportunity is slightly different to meetings within other (more formalised) projects where a more fixed agenda or set objectives need to be considered

- It is a means to find other organisations that support similar aims – this has led, for example, to increased contacts for Social Prescribing, more access to financial advice and connections between the Third Sector and the Public Sector

- It is an opportunity to better observe ourselves – both as a local community, as part of a region and as part of wider National/International human systems

- It may well evolve as the future needs and local interests change. It has already, for example, become an online resource and virtual meeting place (on Facebook) as much as it is a physical network. The network organisers hope to continue to find ways to serve the interests of those participating in it – whatever form(s) this may take in the future.