



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Ian Knowles
Chief Executive
West Lindsey District Council
Guildhall, Marshall's Yard
GAINSBOROUGH
Lincolnshire DN21 2NA

11th February 2020

Dear Ian

Lincolnshire Agricultural Society – Charitable Rate Relief

As you know the Lincolnshire Showground is in my constituency; and it has recently been brought to my attention that there is an ongoing dispute about the Charity's eligibility for 80% rate relief, and that this is now proceeding to court.

I know the Showground well and attend the Lincolnshire Show when parliamentary business allows. I am told by Jane Hiles, Chairman of the Charity's Trustee Board that the dispute arose because WLDC have been advised that bookings of the Showground for concerts, events and meetings exceed the use by LAS the charity and other charities to further their charitable objectives.

I am told that you have been supplied with lots of data and have held meetings to try and resolve this. I haven't seen the data that you are relying on, but Jane Hiles claims that your advisors have been rather selective in re-cutting it to support their case. I am told that for example your advisors claim that other charities only use the Showground for fund raising whereas Jane assures me this is not the case.

You will agree, the Showground is a very important asset to West Lindsey, both delivering a host of other charitable educational events; and through them attracting visitors who support the local economy. It is very well supported, all the Trustees are volunteers, and the Lincolnshire Show wouldn't take place without the support of traders, exhibitors and some 200 volunteer stewards.

The Lincolnshire Showground I understand operates in the same way as some 20 other major Agricultural Showgrounds in the UK, with the charity supported partly by income from commercial lettings. The UK agricultural industry has traditionally relied on its county showgrounds to be centres that host conferences, networking events, meetings, exhibitions etc, all-important focal points for the food and farming industry.

Therefore, it is not just Lincolnshire Showground you are challenging, this case has implications for other major Showgrounds and therefore for the agricultural industry.

Jane tells me all this has been explained to West Lindsey, and that without some income from non-charities the Lincolnshire Show and the Society's charitable work is not viable. The wet Show in 2019 and the burden of the cost of fighting this legal case resulted in a trading loss of over £100,000 in the year 2018-19.

To me the overriding fact is that the Lincolnshire Agricultural Society owns the Showground for the explicit purpose of holding an annual Show for the County of Lincolnshire as stated in its original objectives in 1869, if there was no Show, there would be no need for a Showground. Also, it is critical to realise that the Showground requires maintenance ALL year round even if it were not in use for other events.

The current debt WLDC are claiming is over £180,000 and the annual cost if LAS lose the case is over £60,000. Whilst this is manageable by the charity in the short term it is not sustainable and puts into jeopardy the longer-term future of the Lincolnshire Show.

The Show is a much-loved event, do West Lindsey really want to lose it?

The Society ploughs every penny it earns from any non-charity bookings into maintaining the Showground and delivering its educational work. The Showground is 243 acres and the only event that uses all 243 acres is the Lincolnshire Show. If as you suggest the Society is in fact a commercial events business not a charity, it wouldn't need 243 acres, cattle sheds, parade rings etc to operate its business. These specialist areas cost money to maintain. The Show is a year-round activity, I am told as one Show closes the Showground employees start planning the next one.

The Society can also produce letters of support from the other charities that use the Showground; and will comment on other aspects of your advisors' analysis that Jane considers are unfair or flawed.

The charity does not dispute that in recent years it increased its bookings from other charities and non-charities. These bookings only use part of the showground (sometimes only one room) and the Charity is always in paramount control of the Showground. It is the ratio of activity by the Charity itself and other charities when compared to non-charity bookings that I understand is in dispute.

I am told that the Charity has supplied data to you already for 2017-18 rate year; and are in the process of updating this data for the rate years 2018-19 and 2019-20 to include in their evidence to share with you on 14th February 2020. This is already showing I am told an increasing trend of more activity by the Charity to fulfil its charitable objectives and a reduction of its non-charitable bookings.

The charity's ability to stage more educational events has been greatly enhanced by a recent legacy that has to be spent on 'educating young people in agriculture'.

I ask you to look at the evidence the Charity is submitting very carefully. It supports the representations that have made in previous meetings with your predecessor Mark Sturgess. It may be the challenge he set has made the charity look at what they do and made them realise they need to promote more of what the charity does and how they support other charities. They are also aware that they need to maintain a close eye on the balance between charitable activity and non-charitable use.

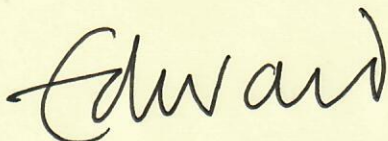
It is only 10 years ago when the Charity hit something of a crisis as they had a large debt after building the EPIC Centre, and I know the Trustees consider the support of WLDC to have been vital in assuring the future of the Showground and the charity.

They need your help again, to find a way forward as certainly the £180,000 debt and the annual increased cost is a very serious issue for them.

I am sure West Lindsey really do not want to damage the future of the Show; nor the Charity's ability to stage so many educational and they accept also other fun events by damaging their ability to maintain a quality Showground that is enjoyed by so many people and brings economic benefits to the area.

I look forward to hearing from you and as ever, I am grateful for your assistance.

Yours sincerely,



EDWARD LEIGH