

## RURAL FORUM

Tuesday 19 March 2024

**Present:** Councillors Mark Howard (Chair), Mandy Brar, Karen Davies and Richard Coe; and William Emmett (Vice-Chair)

**Present virtually:** Councillor George Blundell

**Also in attendance:** Sergeant Catherine Griffiths TVP, Maria Evans, Michael Beaven, Des Sussex, Liz Hadden, Alan Keene, Nick Manderfield, Nick Philp, Geoffrey Copas and James Copas.

**Officers in attendance virtually:** Andrew Durrant, and Jason Mills

### Chair's Introduction

The Chair, Councillor Howard, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Meeting attendees then introduced themselves.

### Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Andrew Randall.

### Declaration of Interest

No interests were declared.

### Minutes

**AGREED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2023 were a true and accurate record.**

### Update on Action Points from the Last Meeting

The Chair read through the action points from the last meeting:

<u>ACTION</u>	<u>UPDATE</u>
<b>Send out farming questionnaire to farmers of the Borough.</b>	While he was aware that his predecessor as clerk had circulated something, Laurence Ellis was uncertain whether it was the questionnaire or something else.  When asked by William Emmett, most Forum attendees answered no.
<b>An update on solar power, with link to climate supplement document, to be added to the next Rural Forum meeting.</b>	COMPLETED – An item on solar energy was added to the current meeting agenda.
<b>Share the report with Forum attendees.</b>	This was in reference to a World Café report. This action was declared as incomplete.
<b>Social Isolation, Mental Health and</b>	This item was to be added to the next

<b>Transportation to be added to next agenda.</b>	meeting agenda.
<b>Share the volunteer list with farmers.</b>	This action was declared as incomplete.
<b>Invite Thames Valley Police to give update on rural crime at next Rural Forum meeting in March 2024.</b>	COMPLETED – An item on Rural Crime was added to the current meeting agenda.
<b>Invite RBWM Planning officers to the next Forum meeting in March 2024.</b>	The Chair informed that a Planning Officer was unable to attend the current meeting but were open to attending the next meeting in November 2024.  When asked by William Emmett, the Chair informed that the Head of Planning was asked if someone could attend but they were short on staff at the moment.

The Chair added that another objective was to invite the Crown Estate. Des Sussex was in attendance to do a presentation on hedgerows and landscape, but some of the managing members of the Estate could attend the current meeting.

In regard to the Rural Site Walk, William Emmett informed that Andrew Randall, a farmer from Pinkneys Green, offered to host it in 2024.

### Solar Panels

Maria Evans, Our Community Enterprise (OCE) Director, and Michael Beaven, OCE Director and Volunteer Director at MaidEnergy, gave an overview of the Furze Platt School Solar Project and the potential opportunities for rural business. OCE was a local consultant organisation which worked for charity and public sector organisations, specialising in fundraising, community ownership and renewables projects. MaidEnergy was a local community energy group.

The Furze Platt Schools Solar Project was a collaboration between local people in the Borough, and Furze Platt School. MaidEnergy organised the installation and leverage funding, while OCE conducted the work behind this. RBWM and its Climate Partnership also helped with investment.

Michael Beaven explained that MaidEnergy was a volunteer-led clean energy cooperative, made up of volunteers. Operating since 2015, it managed since then 7 local sites, including 15 solar arrays and a heat pump. MaidEnergy was financed by community investment which would usually then finance jointly owned solar energy. It worked on the basis that the site would lease their roof space to them, then MaidEnergy would finance and arrange the installation, and then sell the solar power back to the site below the grid price, creating substantial savings. Michael Beaven argued that this provided benefits to investors who use their money to make a positive difference, the site as they were getting power at a lower cost, and for planet Earth as it was cutting carbon emissions.

Furze Platt Big Solar, MaidEnergy's largest site, produced 190.4kW of solar PV (worth the energy of 60-70 houses), saved 38 tonnes of CO2 per annum, and saved the school around £500,000 in energy bills. The site received 96 community investors (half of them being local people), including the Royal Borough's Climate Partnership, accumulating to £248,000 of investment for installation. The school benefited from low-cost energy (including no capital cost) by retaining the solar panels.

Maria Evans then explained that community ownership was a way for local people to invest into something important to them. They tended to have a good success rate whereby they were continuous in contrast to other local businesses which had a 30% success rate. There were 440 community businesses of various models (shops, pubs, community energy, and housing). Community investment had to be led by a community benefit society (CBS), such as MaidEnergy and SaveEnergy in the local area. People could set up their own organisations, such as a farming co-operative, a local shop or pub. With Furze Platt Big Solar, the school owned the roof while the community owned the solar panel; with the latter benefiting from the low-cost energy while the former benefitted from cleaner energy.

Opportunities for rural businesses included solar panel (including roof mount, ground mount, floating, agri-voltaics), battery storage, renewable heat, retrofit, biomass, pyrolysis and other options. Maria Evans highlighted that OCE and MaidEnergy were not installers of solar panel but rather they gather quotes from installers with a survey of the building or site and then leverage the investment.

Further opportunities to rural businesses on solar energy included cost-effective rooftop solar “behind the meter” which users generated electricity themselves and only paying for the capital cost over time rather paying for electricity from the grid. Solar PV generally had a 25+ year life with rapid payback of around 3-5 years. Unused power was exported to the grid or be stored for local use (Energy Local). Rooftop solar was permitted development whereby the installation of more than 50kWp would require prior notification to the planning authority.

In addition, the Royal Payment Agency (RPA) Farming Transformation Fund Improving Farm Productivity Grant Round 2 would fund 25% of the cost of rooftop or floating solar PV. However, the programme was competitive and as such there was no guarantee for funding. In spite of this, community investment may provide possible match funding for 25% of the costs.

Solar PV installations required a grid connection, with larger grid connections likely increasing the costs and potentially need grid reinforcement.

Maria Evans and Michael Beaven concluded their presentation by listing the support available:

- SaveEnergy – free advice from Lynne Moore, decarbonisation lead: [lynne@oce.org.uk](mailto:lynne@oce.org.uk)
- Our Community Enterprise – community investment, grant funding, co-operative model: [maria@oce.org.uk](mailto:maria@oce.org.uk)
- NFU Energy – advice, support, funding via Government subsidies and grant schemes
- Farm clusters, local NFU representatives, private finance

When the Chair asked what pyrolysis was, Maria Evans answered that it was the burning of green waste to create biochar and energy.

On solar energy, Peter Prior, a local farmer, believed that the Local Plan excluded ground-based solar in the greenbelt. When the Chair was uncertain whether this was the case, it was suggested to ask about this.

Geoffrey Copas asked how serious the Council was in improving energy supplies, suggesting that solar powers should be on land with the greenbelt being considered as well as much of the Borough’s land was greenbelt, and believing the Council were not doing enough. The Chair replied that the answer would come from the Planning Department and that the presentation from Maria Evans and Michael Beaven was to show the ability of installing solar panels on roofs. Nevertheless, he stated that the Council was keen to improve the diversity of energy and reliability, adding that it was a balancing act with different interests.

A farmer asked how easy it would be to get a grid connection for independent people. Michael Beaven answered that the element would be more difficult if the scale was large. For Furze Platt Big Solar, installation took 90 days.

In reference to ground solar panels being controversial, John Bloomer, Local Group Secretary for NFU (National Farmers Union), mentioned that the government did a talk at an NFU conference stressing the importance of food security. He referred to a food researcher at Nottingham University who stated that the UK was two-and-a-half times more efficient at food production (particularly beef and grain) relative to South America. With the expectation of increased food demand in the future and the perception of carbon reduction being a local matter, he stated that one acre of beef production being removed from UK and then being substituted by beef production in Brazil would lead to two-and-a-half acres of rainforest being cut down. From this, he cautioned about the choices in making use of local land, which could inadvertently cause further damage to the environment.

### Windsor Hedgerow Project

Des Sussex from the Crown Estate gave a presentation on Hedgerow management in Windsor, particularly Windsor Great Park and Forest. The Crown Estate owned and managed a diversity of hedges, including roadside, agricultural within forestry areas, ornamental areas and gardens. The hedges served various functions, making a landscape attractive, absorb carbon, reduce soil erosion and water runoff, provide a source of biofuel, and provide shelter and food for animals. Des Sussex showcased images of the hedges across the Crown Estate.

A few years ago, the Crown Estate sought to increase its landscape restoration and hedge and tree planting around the parks and agricultural areas of the Estate. This would involve the rebuilding of heritage features lost from the landscape (e.g., rows of trees) and add, for example, in-field trees and hedgerows.

The scheme faced some challenges such as the 2023 heatwave. In addition, there was a high population of deer and other wild animals roaming the Estate. In response, protective fencing had been installed to protect the hedges from the livestock and roaming wild animals. A diverse species of plants had been planted across the Estate, mostly a mix selection of shrubs, such as hawthorn, hazel, holly and blackthorn. There was an objective to create green lanes with the hedges which would allow public rights of way. The hedges would also be able to provide a large volume of fruit and berries for wild birds and mammals.

In terms of trimming, which was a regular challenge, some hedges in the Crown Estate were trimmed annually while others were trimmed infrequently. In terms of benefits to carbon, wildlife and landscape, the Crown Estate considered the height and width of hedges, such as allowing them to grow wider and higher for a period and then cut them. Late winter cutting provided the benefit of leaving berries for wildlife to benefit in the early stages of winter. The Crown Estate marked hedgerow trees to be left alone, taking into account that too hedgerow trees could shade out the hedge, and thus sought to strike a balance.

A team of volunteers conducted hedge laying at Windsor over many years at the Crown Estate, particularly creating stock-proof hedging which would reduce the need for fencing and fence maintenance.

Under this scheme to restore the agricultural parts of the Crown Estate, Des Sussex believed that around 10 kilometres of new hedges had been planted in the last 3 years. He conveyed that the landscape and hedgerow planting was making significant changes to the farming system, such as in-field trees having a positive impact the productivity and management.

Geoffrey Copas commented that hedgerows on a farm had too many disadvantages which outweighed the benefits due to the cost of maintenance and thrips (insects) living in hedges and affecting soft fruits.

Des Sussex responded that there were potentially some stewardship grants which could offset the costs of hedgerow management and planting, though he nevertheless acknowledged the costs of hedges and the big commitment which could then have a negative effect due to

excessive growth. He believed that the cheapest way to manage hedges was an annual hedge trim. He added that hedgerows should not be taken for granted.

Parish Councillor Barbara Story asked how long the Crown Estate left the hedge fence before removing it. Des Sussex answered that it depended how fast the hedge matured, which then dependent on how well it was planted, and the weather during its early growth, though he speculated that it was around 8-to-10 years for a hedge to be robust enough that the fencing could be removed.

Mike, a resident, asked whether the Crown Estate did any measurements on the impact of the hedgerow planting. Des Sussex answered that while the Crown Estate did not do as much as it could have done, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust had conducted some research on the benefits on hedgerow. Additionally, the Crown Estate had recently teamed up with Royal Holloway College whereby some of their students could do some research on Crown Estate's own hedgerows. Also, the Estate had conducted some wildlife monitoring in the last three years, observing birds and butterflies on fixed transits, particularly in areas going through changes. From this, the Crown Estate sought to monitor the impact of changes.

### Rural Crime Update

Sergeant Catherine Griffiths, Thames Valley Police (TVP), gave the rural crime update. She first off informed that Natasha Gidda, the new Inspector at Maidenhead and Windsor, was keen to mitigate rural crime, such as through working with the Rural Crime Taskforce. She then shared some crime figures:

- From December 2023 to February 2024, 26 rural crimes had been reported. Some were repeat offences at the usual locations, such as lamping and hunting. The most common crime in Windsor and Maidenhead was wildlife crime, consisting of catapulting of wild birds.
- TVP dealt with 16 confirmed offences as well as dealt with three offenders in December 2023. TVP also dealt with five offenders catapulting swans in the Town Centre during a Rural Crime Week.
- There were 6 offences of lamping between December 2023 to February 2024. Lamping was difficult to tackle as callers may see vehicles driving on land but do not see a crime in progress and therefore confirm an offence.
- Informative packs were distributed during Rural Crime Week which included information on how to sign up to the rural crime WhatsApp group.
- The WhatsApp group had around 68 people. Despite some reservations, Sergeant Catherine Griffiths encouraged people to use it to help TVP.
- The Rural Crime Taskforce visited 10 farms in Windsor, 20 farms in Maidenhead and targeted operations in the wider area.
- TVP had worked with Surrey Police to tackle lamping and wildlife crime.
- There was no trend or spike in any sort of crimes or in any specific area. There was a reduction in hair coursing but there was an increase in wildlife crime.

The Chair asked if the digital version of the informative pack could be shared so that it could be circulated after the meeting. Sergeant Catherine Griffiths agreed.

**ACTION: A digital copy of the informative pack be circulated to Forum attendees.**

Mentioning a case where a police officer he had contact concerning trespassers, in which he mentioned that he was only officer covering Bracknell, Slough, Maidenhead and Windsor, Peter Prior asked if police resources had improved. Sergeant Catherine Griffiths answered that resources had increased, particularly neighbourhood policing, with an increase in police officers being employed. The Rural Crime Taskforce had 10 officers as part of it.

John Baldwin, a resident, asked about the impact of TVP tackling rural crime within the Borough, particularly on organised crime and the theft of farm equipment on farmland, and wondered if further information could be provided. The Chair mentioned that Police Inspector Stuart Hutchings gave a presentation at the [previous Rural Forum meeting in November 2023](#) which covered the theft of farming equipment and how it was tackled, and that there was a time lag between an offender getting arrested and TVP being allowed to reveal details of the case (around 2 years). John Baldwin clarified that TVP could have shared the scope of their operations. The Chair suggested that Sergeant Catherine Griffiths could share that information with him.

**ACTION: Sergeant Catherine Griffiths to share information on the extent and locations of any operations undertaken by TVP.**

The Chair asked whether the theft of a tractor was recorded as a rural crime or it was considered a crime in a rural area, highlighting that the update covered mostly hare coursing and lamping. Sergeant Catherine Griffiths confirmed that such a crime would constitute as theft and that TVP ensured that such a crime would be recorded as a rural crime.

John Bloomer asked what information TVP received from the Rural Crime WhatsApp group, stating that it had received mixed feedback. Sergeant Catherine Griffiths replied that it was positive as it allowed a quicker way to report incidents between communities and alert them to what was going on in contrast to a longer process. She encouraged residents to use the WhatsApp group to report any crimes so that TVP could be made aware of them and then tackle it, or directly call.

William Emmett critically highlighted the lack of police presence and response to crimes and asked about the promise from the Police Commissioner and from the previous Council administration for more police. He mentioned a case on Boxing Day 2023 where 10 armed police apprehended some trespassers committing hare coursing on some land near the Drift Road due to the mention of gun fire when the incident was being reported. He contrasted this with another occurrence of hare coursing a week later when no police turned up. Sergeant Catherine Griffiths explained that the aforementioned incident was an armed deployment, hence the numbers and swift response from TVP. In contrast, conventional responses would receive community officers, by which there were fewer in number, at a slower time.

After William Emmett raised the two phone numbers 999 and 101, Sergeant Catherine Griffiths stated that web forms could be filled out if its longer-term.

A resident asked where the Rural Crime Taskforce was based in, to which Sergeant Catherine Griffiths replied that it was in Kidlington, Oxford. The resident then asked whether the East Berkshire was forgotten about by the Rural Crime Taskforce, particularly as it was based in Oxfordshire which was relatively more rural. Sergeant Catherine Griffiths denied that this was the case, stating that there were still TVP officers and that there was relatively less rural crime in the Windsor and Maidenhead area compared to Newbury and West Berkshire.

### Update from the Rural and Farming Community

Nick Manderfield, a farmer, gave an overview on the issue of TB (tuberculosis), a bacterial infection which caused respiratory problems, affecting cows, humans and various wildlife. He highlighted that TB needed to be controlled on the grounds of animal, as well as human, health and welfare, particularly as it could be transmitted to humans in milk before pasteurisation. Thus, he conveyed that managing TB within the livestock was vital to control this, though vaccinations were no where closer to being implemented. As TB easily spread through airborne transmission, it could easily spread to farms through cattle movement. As such, farms had to enact stringent testing both before and after they moved cattle.

A pressing issue Nick Manderfield stated was TB being spread by wildlife movement, notably roaming deer and badgers, and then spreading it to cattle. He mentioned a couple of TB

breakouts on his farm with the second one causing him to lose 20 cows. From this, alongside continuous testing by farmers, Nick Manderfield conveyed that landowners in East Berkshire needed to impose managed wildlife control to inhibit the spread of TB.

William Emmett added that badger culling in England had effectively reduced TB cases. Meanwhile, TB in Wales was widespread due to badger culling being prohibited.

Nick Manderfield then discussed the general state of the farming industry. He explained that arable farmers were experiencing difficult times with feed wheat prices at £60 per tonne; while input prices had declined after the War in Ukraine, this was not enough. While he acknowledged that energy security was vital, Nick Manderfield stressed that food security was vital and should be brought to more attention. While there had been green schemes on some farms, such as growing wildflowers, he commented that every acre of land taken out of food production in the UK meant that 2-and-a-half acres of rainforest being destroyed in Brazil, in reference to John Bloomer's earlier comments.

Nick Manderfield stated that the problem was not farmers affecting the environment but rather the increasing UK and world population which led to increasing food demand. He further highlighted that there was more incentive to enter wildflower schemes as it was becoming more uneconomical to graze livestock, which then led to the reduction of livestock in the area. He also asserted that the urban population did not recognise the conservation work which the farming industry had done and stated that there should be greater appreciation from urban residents on the conservation work which farmers had done. He suggested there could be greater interaction between farmers and urban customers to help them realise this. To sum up, Nick Manderfield stated that green land within the Borough was conserved and maintained by the farming community, that the farming community declining would mean that this land would no longer be maintained, highlighting that farmers could not be green if it was financially unsustainable.

Nick Manderfield then briefly mentioned the weather patterns, particularly the heavy rainfall in 2023 and January 2024. This had caused crops to be lost and fields to become boggy. On a slightly positive note, during the flooding event in Hurley in January 2024, Nick Manderfield explained a time when the grain store of a farming neighbour was being threatened by rising flood water. After this farmer called for aid, all the local farmers in the area turned up with tractors and trailers to save the grain, to which Nick Manderfield conveyed was an example of the local community work.

John Bloomer commented that the farming community was not great at advertising the positive contributions they had done on farming and ecology, such as forest maintenance and reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions over the decades, and therefore was not understood or acknowledged by the non-farming community despite a lot of work in the farming industry to co-exist alongside the environment. He believed that greater interaction between the farming and non-farming communities could build better understanding.

Councillor Coe asked whether there was open farm Sundays in which residents could visit and/or work on the farms. William Emmett mentioned that he was doing a session. When Councillor Coe asked whether open farm Sundays go through the Borough so that it could promote it, William Emmett hoped for as many Borough Councillors as possible to attend these farm visits alongside their spouses to promote understanding of the issues experienced by the wider farming community as well as work with the Borough. He then hoped that many Councillors would attend the Rural Site Visit planned for July 2024. He also mentioned that he had done an open farm Sunday session in 2023 in which thousands of people attended.

James Copas mentioned that his farm offered schools and tours visits whereby students learned about food production on farms. In addition, he worked with Wild Cookham in creating and managing a 50-acre conservation area at Marsh Meadow.

Speaking for Wild Maidenhead, Maria Evans mentioned that there were 200 members at Wild Maidenhead who were interested in conservation and biodiversity but did not understand what farmers were doing and suggested that a dialogue between the local Wild groups and the farming community.

John Bloomer highlighted that there was an NFU-managed Farmers for Schools programme whereby farmers who were ambassadors were sent to schools with interactive games to educate children about food production. He offered to provide links between farming ambassadors and schools who may be interested.

### Item Suggestions for Future Forums

Items suggested for the next meeting:

- Invite the Crown Estate.
- Invite a Planning Officer.
- Mental health and loneliness, potentially by someone from the FCN and RABI.
- A tree officer to talk about on TPOs, legislation on tree planting, and how farmers and landowners could work with them.

### Dates of Future Meetings

The Chair confirmed that the next meeting of the Forum would be on 19 November 2024, followed by the next one on 25 March 2025.

The meeting, which began at 5.32 pm, finished at 7.52 pm

Chair.....

Date.....