

## RURAL FORUM

22 NOVEMBER 2011

Present: Councillors Mrs Bateson (Chairman), Coppinger, Hilton (Vice-Chairman), Mrs Jones and Rayner.

Robert Byde (equestrian), James Copas (farmer), John Emmett (farmer), Tim Parry (Community Council for Berkshire), Andrew Randall (farmer), Richard Simmons (farmer), Parish Councillor Mrs Story (Sunninghill & Ascot Parish Council) and Parish Councillor Westacott.

Inspector Pete Dalton (Thames Valley Police) and Anne Chalmers (Thames Valley Police).

Officers: Sarah Ball, Stephen Brown, Harjit Hunjan and Michael Kiely.

### PART I

#### 11/11 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor D Evans.

#### 12/11 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

#### 13/11 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 29 June 2011 were approved.

#### 14/11 CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The Chairman welcomed all present to the meeting.

#### 15/11 BROADBAND AVAILABILITY IN RURAL AREAS

During a presentation by the Community and Business Partnerships Manager the following points were made:

- Studies had shown that Superfast Broadband could give a real boost to local economies.
- The six Berkshire unitary authorities were working jointly with the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to promote Superfast Berkshire, a programme to bring fast broadband to all.
- The government funding contribution to Superfast Berkshire was expected to be £1.43million.
- A further funding bid had been submitted. The results of this bid would be known no later than June 2012.
- Further information was available at [www.superfastberkshire.org.uk](http://www.superfastberkshire.org.uk)

In the ensuing discussion, the following comments were made:

- There had been a slight delay to the submission of the bid.
- Businesses would be expected to contribute towards the £1.5million required.
- If the bid was successful some funds would be invested in 'quick wins', but overall the delivery plan was scheduled to last two or three years.
- Section 106 contributions would not be permitted as part of the business contribution. It was agreed that the Chairman and the Strategy and Plans Team Manager (Sarah Ball), would look into the possibility of utilising the Community Infrastructure Levy.

#### 16/11 UPDATE FROM FARMERS (INCORPORATING AN UPDATE ON THE E.U.)

Mr Randall gave a comprehensive presentation on the current state of local agriculture, within the context of the European Union.

During the presentation the following comments were made:

- On 12<sup>th</sup> October 2011 the commission presented a set of legal proposals to reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) after 2013. The aim of this was to guarantee EU citizens healthy and quality food production whilst preserving the environment. The objectives were viable food production, sustainable management of rural resources and balanced territorial development.
- As well as a Basic Payment Scheme there would be additional Payments for "greening", "young farmers aid", "small farmers aid", "natural constraints", and "coupled support".
- The Forum was presented with market updates for finished cattle and lambs, feed wheat and oil seed rape.

In a brief discussion the following comments were made:

- A more simplified Common Agricultural Policy was hoped for, but this now seemed increasingly unlikely
- The recent rainfalls in east Berkshire had been very welcome.
- The specifics of the percentage of land which could be allocated to 'set aside' had yet to be published.

#### 17/11 RURAL CRIME

The Forum received a presentation by William Emmett. It was noted that he was due to become the next Chairman of the Berks, Bucks and Oxon National Farmers' Union (NFU).

During the presentation the following points were made:

- Diversity in farming had created a greater range of opportunities for criminals.
- Rural areas had become targets for crime, just as the urban environment was.

- Greater policing of the national borders was required. Stolen plant and machinery was often broken down and exported as parts, which were difficult to distinguish.
- The loss of working dogs was a growing trend. Alarming, three dogs had been taken from near High Wycombe and their return was offered in exchange for a ransom.
- The existence of the Dogwatch organisation, based near Henley, was noted.
- Hare coursing and the hunting of other wildlife remained a significant concern, and the number of incidents continued to rise.
- Metal thefts were on the increase and a request was made that scrap dealers be subjected to improved enforcement.
- Mr Emmett reflected upon a meeting he had attended with the Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police. He suggested to her that the police stations within the Thames Valley and beyond needed greater communication with each other as crime and criminals crossed station 'borders'. The Chief Constable had not seen the need for more emails between police stations, but it remained something that the NFU would press for.
- It was acknowledged that the rural community needed to do more to protect against crime and the local farming community had started to invest in electronic gates, tracker devices and immobilisers, improved lighting and locks and practical solutions like stopping up entrances and gates with barriers. He asked that more be done to improve the visibility of the police and the ability of the legal system to successfully prosecute offenders.

Inspector Dalton's response included the following comments:

- Scrap metal was a priority in the Thames Valley. It was about to feature in the new Force Strategic Plan. A force wide metal theft operation was at an early planning stage.
- National legislation on scrap metal was firmly out of date. It would be subject to significant revisions.
- It was noted that those bringing in scrap to dealers were not currently required to show any form of identification.
- In relation to improving communications, members were encouraged to sign up to the community messaging system. Over 9,000 people had signed up. In 2012 this would be augmented by the launch of a mobile phone text messaging service.
- Members were also encouraged to find out who their neighbourhood officers were. Contact details were available on websites. As well as the 999 number for emergency response, there was now a new number, 101, for non-emergency calls. Both numbers could supply a unique reference number which members were encouraged to hold on to for any follow up enquiries.
- Attention was drawn to the free professional crime prevention advice available from Anne Chalmers.
- In relation to coursing and illegal hunting it was suggested that where it was safe to do so descriptions, vehicle registrations or photographs should be taken. It was confirmed that the Police did have the power to stop, search and seize the property of anyone they suspected of illegal hunting. If an actual offence was suspected then arrests could be made.

- Inspector Dalton's equivalent officer for Maidenhead and the surrounding areas was confirmed to be Inspector Townsend.

The Chairman thanked Inspector Dalton and Anne Chalmers for their attendance at the meeting. It was agreed that rural crime would remain a standing agenda item.

18/11

## RE-USE OF REDUNDANT FARM BUILDINGS IN THE BOROUGH

The Forum was firstly addressed by John Emmett.

During the presentation the following comments were made:

- The Borough's Local Plan was due to be reviewed.
- Farms were having to diversify in order to maintain a stable income. This included farm shops, pick your own schemes, on-site processing of meat and vegetables, farm tourism, bed and breakfast, camping, lunches for shooting and livery stables.
- This type of diversification was estimated to provide around 27% of farm income in the country.
- Around 73% of non-farming income was generated by letting unused buildings. For this reason farmers found the current policies frustrating and sometimes obscure.
- The proliferation of polo pitches in the Borough was noted.
- The complexity and perceived unreliability of the planning system sometimes led businesses to proceed with plans without planning permission, in the hope of obtaining a certificate of lawful use at a later date.
- The use of redundant buildings could assist the provision of employment locally, with potential reductions in traffic movements.

In response the Strategy and Plans Team Manager (Sarah Ball) advised the Forum that:

- The Borough's existing Local Plan was fully consulted upon. It was strongly linked to the previous Berkshire Structure Plan.
- The Borough's green belt policies matched national policy.
- The Local Plan does not support big business based in rural areas.
- The ongoing development of the Neighbourhood Plans within the Borough was noted.
- It was agreed that policies on equestrian activities did require further enhancement.
- The review of the Borough Local Plan depended on the input of businesses, members of the public and elected Councillors, so all comments were welcomed.
- It was hoped that the new Borough Local Plan would be submitted and adopted by April 2013.

In a presentation by the Strategy and Plans Team Manager (Sarah Ball), the following points were made:

- Government guidance on green belts was included within PPG2: Green Belts.
- The objectives contained within the Borough's local plan were designed to "encourage the re-use of surplus/redundant buildings in the countryside for uses appropriate to the countryside."
- The Borough's policy GB8 included seven tests or criteria which had to be adhered to. In addition, it was explained that the Council would also impose such conditions as appropriate to ensure that the openness of the Green Belt, and the purposes of including land within it, were maintained.
- The draft National Planning Policy Framework was expected to extend what constituted appropriate development by referring to buildings rather than dwellings, and to previously developed sites rather than defined major development sites. The changes were also expected to provide greater opportunity for development and activity within potentially isolated Green Belt areas, and also reduce the Council's ability to negotiate improvements to the openness of the Green Belt. Development in isolated areas had the potential to increase the need to travel, particularly by car.

During the general discussion the following comments were made:

- A query was raised as to how the Borough defined a building as redundant, and how it policed its own policies. Members were assured that Planning and Enforcement officers were always on the lookout for potential breaches but it was accepted that they were to some extent reliant on the public to submit queries or complaints.
- Good enforcement would continue to be required of farmers who perhaps were not genuine, wishing to place caravans on land they owned. Enforcement was also required of those who purchased land and then tried to break it up into small plots.
- It was agreed that planning matters would feature on future Forum agendas.
- The farming community was encouraged to involve itself in Borough Local Plan process in order to put forward their message about farm diversity. A view was expressed that this could be contrary to the views of rural residents, some of whom appeared to want to live in dormitory villages where farming and rural businesses did not operate. The possibility of a workshop for the rural business community was briefly discussed.

## 19/11 HIGHWAYS (CONDITION OF) AND WINTER SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS

The Forum was addressed by Stephen Brown, the Borough's Head of Highways and Engineering.

During the presentation the following comments were made:

- The Winter Service commenced on 28<sup>th</sup> October and would run until 30<sup>th</sup> March 2012. The salting process was most effective if it was applied immediately prior to freezing.

- There was around 1600 tons of salt in stock, in preparation for the winter season.
- Four main gritting vehicles and a snow plough would be utilised to clear the primary and secondary routes. Full details on these routes were available on the borough website. The vehicles and the salt store were based at Stafferton Way, Maidenhead.
- The Participatory Budgeting process had allocated further resources to the Winter Service. This included the purchase of smaller equipment to treat more local roads.
- Treatment vehicles could be tracked 'live', as they were fitted with GPS trackers.
- Footways and cycleways were not normally presalted, but they were treated and cleared of snow in town centres, and outside schools and hospitals, particularly during severe and prolonged hazardous weather conditions.
- A farmers contract had been set up and circulated to local farmers to secure additional resources to help clear the roads in rural areas in times of severe weather.
- Around sixty yellow salt bins were located around the Borough. 56 bins were also provided to parishes and to residents groups. Details on their locations were published on the Borough website.

In the ensuing discussion the following comments were made:

- Farmers were encouraged to participate in the farmers contract. Details from other councils had been researched and the farmers contract was designed to safeguard the Borough and farmers against possible litigation. It was confirmed that the legislation was clear, as long as the Borough and farmers acted sensibly there should be no problems.
- The Borough was unable to supply spare snow ploughs, they were generally used until they were worn out.

20/11 ANY OTHER BUSINESS, ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION AT FUTURE MEETINGS AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The issue of road closures (Gordon Oliver) was suggested as an item for consideration at a future meeting.

It was agreed that the next meeting should be planned for late May 2012 at 5.30pm. This would be preceded in early May by a Rural Walk to which all Councillors should be invited. The walk would take place at Hornbuckle Farm.

21/11 MEETING

The meeting, which began at 5.30pm, ended at 7.25pm.

CHAIRMAN .....

DATE .....