

RURAL FORUM

5 NOVEMBER 2012

Present: Councillors Mrs Christine Bateson (Chairman), David Coppinger, David Evans, David Hilton (Vice-Chairman) and Mrs Lynne Jones

Robert Byde (equestrian), Brenda Copas (local landowner), Geoffrey Copas (local farmer), James Copas (Copas Farms), John Emmett (local farmer), William Emmett (local farmer / NFU Chairman), Philip Everett (Crown Estate), A Keene, Philip Mortimer (rural/farming), Tim Parry (Community Council for Berkshire), David Philp (David Philp & Partner), Nick Philp (local farming co.), Andrew Randall (rural/farming), Paul Rinder (rural/farming), Parish Councillor Mrs Story (Sunninghill & Ascot Parish Council), Christopher Westacott (Hurley Parish Council / farming).

Officers: Sarah Ball, Harjit Hunjan, Simon Lavin, Eric Livingstone and Karen Williams.

PART I

13/12 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Rayner and Jane Jennings.

14/12 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

15/12 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 25 June 2012 were approved, subject to the addition of William Emmet to the apologies.

16/12 CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The Chairman welcomed all present to the meeting.

17/12 POLICY ON USE OF REDUNDANT FARM BUILDINGS

The Team Manager – Strategy and Plans explained that Policy GB8 had been in the Adopted Plan for a number of years. It would be very useful for her to receive feedback from the farming community about the problems they experienced in addressing the criteria in the policy. She suggested a mini workshop take place to discuss the issue.

The Forum noted that there was a need to amend the policy in light of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The need for additions to not be

disproportionate was still emphasised. References to permanent and substantial constructions should still be included in a revised policy.

John Emmett commented that RBWM was one of the few local authorities that had retained a threshold criterion. Replacement criteria had also been relaxed in government guidance. Geoffrey Copas commented that the restriction threshold was pointless and each application should be judged on its own merits. He felt that the policy was an issue for farmers, Councillors and the NFU because it restricted the ability of farmers to farm the Green Belt for the benefit of the community as a whole.

Robert Bye commented that equestrian buildings were not covered by the policy. The Team Manager – Strategy and Plans agreed that there were a number of other policies in relation to equestrian issues that would need to be reviewed.

It was agreed that the Team Manager – Strategy and Plans would meet with John Emmett, Nick Philp, Paul Rinder and Robert Bye at 4.30pm on Tuesday 13 November 2012 at Lordlands Farm to discuss both GB8 and equine policies. John Emmett would also invite John Andrews. The Team Manager – Strategy and Plans agreed to circulate information on proposed changes to the policy in advance of the meeting.

18/12 HIGHWAYS ISSUES

The Streetcare Manager explained that 99% of verges, ditches and hedges in the borough were owned by landowners and private households, as opposed to the council. The council was responsible for ensuring hedges did not overhang the public highway or create a hazard for road users or pedestrians. When highway inspectors observed an overgrown hedge, they would contact the owner and request they address the issue. If the landowner failed to act the work could be carried out by the council and recharged.

Geoff Copas commented that compared to other European countries, there was a reluctance in the UK to trim hedgerows as it was seen as destroying natural vegetation. Farmers wished for the council to require landowners abutting the highway to trim their hedges. Farmers were advised to contact Streetcare for any specific problems areas of which they were aware. The Streetcare Manager explained that the council's policy was reactive due to limited resources but officers would respond to any reported problems. The Chairman suggested farmers could also notify their Ward Councillor.

Councillor D Evans commented that there was a problem with ditches within his ward, particularly in Waltham St Lawrence. The previous day the ditches had become flooded and the drains on the highway had been unable to cope. The Parish Council had been working for the last year to establish clarity as to who was responsible for clearing the ditches. It was confirmed that the landowner or property owner was responsible for clearing the ditches on their frontage. In Waltham St Lawrence a large proportion of the ditches were

designated as main river courses. The Environment Agency (EA) was therefore responsible for enforcement. Nick Philp commented that letters had been sent to the EA to explain the failure to drain Twyford Brook was resulting in flooding of farmland. William Emmett commented that farmers were unable to dredge ditches on their land that were deemed main watercourses without EA approval. It had proved difficult in the past to receive a response to requests to undertake such work. He informed attendees that a senior officer at the EA was due to attend an upcoming NFU meeting to discuss the issue. It was noted that the EA was part of Defra, which had recently experienced major cuts in funding. Geoff Copas commented that ditches could only be cleaned in dry conditions. The dry period from March to June was not possible as dredging was banned in case moorhens were nesting. The other dry period in early autumn was the busiest time for harvesting. He also commented that the flow of York Stream in Maidenhead could be affected by a lack of clearing by the EA in the Cookham area.

It was agreed that the EA should be invited to the next meeting of the Forum in June 2013.

The Streetcare Manager confirmed that it was not always a requirement for farmers to install traffic lights whilst cutting hedges. The safety requirements were dependent on the classification of road, average speed and prevailing conditions. Farmers were advised to contact Streetcare Officers to discuss necessary requirements.

In relation to overgrown hedges, farmers were encouraged to contact the Customer Service Centre on 01628 683800 or email streetcare@rbwm.gov.uk.

Councillor Jones commented that she had reported a problem a few weeks ago. She had immediately received a reference number and the hedge was trimmed within two weeks.

William Emmett requested that the local authority take a more proactive approach to removing Ragwort on highways and verges. It was noted that farmers could get fined if it were found on their land. The Streetcare Manager agreed to contact colleagues in leisure services who would be responsible for the issue.

Geoff Copas commented that the amount of waste dumping in rural areas had reduced over the last year. John Emmet highlighted that car dumping had also been a problem a few years previously but this had lessened possibly as a result of the rise in the price of scrap metal. The Streetcare Manager confirmed that fly tipping was removed within 24 hours if it represented a clear and present danger. The council worked with neighbouring authorities on enforcement and there had been a number of successful prosecutions. The number of incidents had reduced but there had been an increase in the dumping of domestic waste. All incidents would be investigated and

prosecuted where possible. William Emmett commented that waste dumping was still a problem on bridleways and byways.

It was confirmed that, under national legislation, landowners were responsible for clearing up after travellers had left a temporary site. The council would help landowners where possible, for example by providing skips and undertaking enforcement.

19/12 UPDATE ON NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS AND THE LOCAL BOROUGH PLAN

The Team Manager – Strategy and Plans reported that Cabinet in October had considered a Borough Local Plan report on the preparation for a sites consultation. The consultation would begin on 19 November and run for six weeks. Publicity would include details on the borough website, an article in *Around the Royal Borough*, a separate flier, press releases and a public notice. Following the consultation, and considering the results of this, appropriate sites would then necessitate further technical work prior to further consideration for the inclusion as potential allocated sites in a draft Borough Local Plan.

The Chairman commented that the council had opted for a range in the number of dwellings required under the Plan (290-350 dwellings per annum).

It was noted that updates on all the Neighbourhood Plans were available on the council's website:

- Ascot, Sunninghill and Sunningdale had recently held very successful workshops in relation to Ascot High Street
- Bisham had formally decided to run with a Neighbourhood Plan and talk to local groups
- Bray had held a couple of workshops last month.
- Datchet was holding regular half hour meetings prior to the Parish Council meetings
- Horton and Wraysbury were working on a joint plan; a monthly committee had been set up.
- Hurley & the Walthams were running exhibitions.
- Maidenhead and Cox Green were forming topic groups and had planned a launch event
- Old Windsor was approaching other organisations and planning a questionnaire
- Windsor – consultation had been undertaken

The Team Manager – Strategy and Plans commented that the local nature of the plans fed off and necessitated local input. Officers were responsible for one or more plans and provided help and support when required.

Councillor D Evans commented that he had been impressed with the popularity and success of the recent workshops in Hurley and the Walthams, which had been organised by Councillor Mrs Hunt. He raised a concern that the development of the Borough Local Plan in advance of neighbourhood plans could undermine the process. The Chairman urged attendees to get involved in their local area. The Team Manager – Strategy and Plans explained that such concerns were not new but that plan production was a two way discussion between the Borough Local Plan and the neighbourhood plans. As long as all groups involved worked together and adequate support was provided to the Neighbourhood Plan groups, she believed it would be a smooth and valuable process. For example, when selecting sites for the Borough Local Plan, all Neighbourhood Plan groups had been consulted, along with Ward Councillors and the Parish Council. If elements of the Borough Local Plan did not fit the needs of an area, the Neighbourhood Plan could work on its own policy as long as it was in general conformity. Councillor D Evans suggested the iterative nature of the process be emphasised and recognition be given to local views being taken into account.

The Chairman explained that if a community came up with an idea for development in the local community and could demonstrate very special circumstances, this could be included in the Neighbourhood Plan and consider at a referendum by the local residents.

Councillor Hilton commented that the proposals for Ascot High Street would need to provide very special circumstances. He believed that Neighbourhood Plans provided granularity which sat below the Borough Local Plan.

Geoff Copas commented that a village plan had been developed in Cookham a few years ago but had then not been accepted by the Parish Council. People in the area were therefore not willing to develop a Neighbourhood Plan based on past experience. He hoped the upcoming Village Design Statement would include proper consultation. He felt that the Green Belt boundaries in the area meant there was not enough space for communities to grow. The Chairman commented that consultation had shown that 89% of residents wanted no development in the Green Belt unless very special circumstances could be demonstrated. Geoff Copas questioned the number of respondents to the survey. Councillor Hilton commented that in surveys undertaken in the Windsor area, which had received high response rates, 90% had supported the Green Belt. William Emmett commented that he had repeatedly tried to ensure the rural voice was heard and to demonstrate that the countryside was a living, breathing ever-changing environment.

19/12 UPDATE FROM FARMERS

The update was provided by Andrew Randall:

The dairy industry continued to face an uphill struggle. There had been a small win earlier in the year when the widely publicised price cut of 2p/litre had been reversed. A new code of practice had also been introduced.

However, the current price was 1p/litre less than the same time the year before and costs were up by 2.5p/litre. Beef prices were up 5% on the previous year and were expected to rise towards Christmas. Lamb was down 10% due to a challenging season.

The pilot badger cull to address bovine TB had been postponed as a result of adverse weather conditions and the lack of a sufficient timeframe. It had also been discovered that the badger population had significantly increased and the plan would not be effective unless 70-80% were culled.

The 2012 arable crop harvest had been the wettest in recent years. Wheat yields were on average down 15% although there was significant local variance to as much as -40%. On the global scene wheat prices were up 40% but many farmers had forward-sold their crop so could not benefit from the increased price. Only 3% of milling wheat had made the grade. Only 50% of crops had been planted for the 2013 harvest and much of this was rotting in waterlogged fields. The bad weather in 2012 had reinforced the need for farms to diversify.

It was confirmed that the closest TB hotspots were in West Berkshire. The pilot culls had been due to take place in Gloucestershire and Somerset. In the last 12 months 34,000 cattle had been killed as a result of bovine TB. European countries were indicating they would refuse future exports of British beef if the TB issue was not sorted out. He was unsure if TB outbreaks had been reported in Europe; he would investigate and report back to Councillor Hilton.

John Emmett commented that the recent bad weather would mean the 2013 harvest would be disastrous. Philip Mortimer confirmed he had so far only planted 20% of his land and the window of opportunity was running out. It was explained that in general most farmers no longer left fields to lie fallow. The best way to improve the soil was to have a good growing crop.

William Emmett commented that the worldwide available stock of grain for food and energy was dropping yet demand was rising. Russia and Ukraine had banned exports to the world market.

Robert Hyde commented that in general the equestrian industry was ok, however there had been outbreaks of strangles in a number of stables. In most cases the outbreaks had been contained however further cases were expected. Strangles was a viral disease and was not related to the weather conditions.

20/12 BROADBAND AVAILABILITY IN RURAL AREAS

The Forum noted that there were pockets of poor broadband provision (less than 2MB/second or no service at all) in all six Berkshire unitary authorities. In the Royal Borough there were 6847 residential properties and 378

business premises with poor service, predominantly within Parish/Rural areas.

David Allen (Aldermaston Parish Councillor) had been appointed as Project Manager to oversee the next phase of the project (Procurement). Berkshire's Local Broadband Plan was formally approved by Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) on 22 May 2012. Preparations were underway to source a broadband solution from the marketplace using BDUK's Procurement Framework, with a signed contract in place by 31 January 2013.

Work would start after contract signature and would continue until May 2015 to reach a target of 90% of premises served by superfast Broadband (24Mb/s or faster) and the remaining 10% receiving broadband speeds of at least 2Mb/s. Funding would total £6m. The private sector would supply 50% of the upgrade costs, 25% would be funded by central government, with the remaining 25% by the six Berkshire councils. The Royal Borough and West Berkshire would provide the majority of local authority funding, based on need.

The Forum noted that the project was expected to benefit over 37,000 premises across Berkshire. The successful supplier would be contracted to supply the service from February 2013, and would identify hot spots to prioritise work. These 'keen' areas would get 24Mb/s broadband early in the process. No interest areas may well not be upgraded at all. To register local interest and to show the eventual supplier the demand for better broadband, residents were being encouraged to visit the website and register: www.superfastberkshire.org.uk/register

West Berkshire had already registered over 5000 people, whereas the Royal Borough had so far only registered 120. Farmers were asked to promote the issue to their residents and encourage them to sign up. Posters and leaflets were available.

Tim Parry commented that it would be important to highlight why superfast broadband would be needed, for future uses not yet necessarily identified.

William Emmett expressed concern that areas with very low density of properties would not be considered even if residents registered their interest. Tim Parry explained that the purpose of the project was to identify market failure and get the private providers to put in infrastructure in areas they would not normally consider.

Councillor Mrs Jones commented that the issue could be highlighted in two newsletters in Old Windsor. Parish Councillor Mrs Story suggested farmers could help with trench digging.

21/12 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Streetcare Manager provided an update from the Head of Highways on the Drift Road issue discussed at the last meeting. The Head of Highways was awaiting information from Robert Byde as to what had been introduced in other areas. He would then discuss proposals with the Lead Member. Further information would be provided at the next meeting.

22/12 ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION AT FUTURE MEETINGS

The Forum requested the attendance of the Team Leader – Strategy and Plans at the next meeting to update on the policy on redundant farm buildings.

23/12 MEETING

The meeting, which began at 5.30pm, ended at 7.30pm.

CHAIRMAN

DATE