

RURAL FORUM

MONDAY, 11 NOVEMBER 2019

PRESENT: Councillors Christine Bateson (Chairman), David Coppinger, Maureen Hunt, David Cannon and Gerry Clark

Also in attendance: Barbara Story, Nick Philp, Matthew Sell, Michael Craig, Philip Mortimer, William Emmett, Hayden Lanaford, Inspector Louise Warbrick, Geoffrey Copas, Liz Hadden and Annie Keene

Officers: David Scott, Helen Leonard and Mark Beeley

CHAIRMAN FOR THE MEETING

David Scott explained to the Forum that the meeting was now considered an outside body and could therefore appoint its own Chairman, which was to be discussed in the Terms of Reference agenda item. However, there needed to be a Chairman for the meeting.

Councillor Bateson was confirmed by the Forum as the Chairman for the meeting.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Alan Keen, John Bloomer, Tim Parry, James Hope and Councillor Rayner.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; That the minutes of the meeting held on 4th March 2019 were approved, providing the following amendment was made:

- In 'Update from the Farming Community', it was said that "we were not self-sufficient in milk production" when this should have said that the UK is self-sufficient.

MATTERS ARISING FROM LAST MEETING AND ANNUAL RURAL FORUM FARM WALK

Councillor Hunt raised an issue from the previous meeting, regarding travellers and what landowners could do to prevent them from entering private land along with what obligations RBWM and the police had.

She was informed by Louise Warbrick, Thames Valley Police, that unauthorised incursions were the responsibility of the landowner, whether that be RBWM on council land, or on private land which would be the responsibility of the private land owner. The police needed clear evidence to intervene and that assessments and welfare checks would take place. If a court order to leave needed to be served, this would go through the courts and could take up to 10 days. There were not the same obligations on private land owners, but they would either have to go through the bailiff's or to the courts to obtain a vacant possession order.

A member of the Forum suggested that the council needed to provide somewhere for travellers to go, so that they do not disturb the local community. David Scott explained that currently RBWM does not have a transit site and there were only a limited number of these provided nationally. Travellers could be required to move to a transit site with the police being given the power to move them on.

Councillor Coppinger commented that RBWM should look in to acquiring a transit site and that it could possibly be shared with other local authorities in Berkshire.

Councillor Cannon asked if there was an update on broadband roll-out to rural areas. David Scott said that there had been a change of team and some of the obstacles that they were facing were different to the ones discussed at the last meeting. Phase 3a of the project was focussed on West Berkshire, with details for areas in RBWM starting to become more clearer for the next sub phase. Roll out for RBWM was scheduled to commence in March 2020, with the project due to take around six months. The aim was for between 98.5% and 99.5% of homes to have access to broadband once the roll out was completed.

The Chairman pointed out that West Berkshire had a number of large outlying villages. David Scott confirmed that the area was not as well supported when the national project started, and therefore the local authority had decided to invest more of their own funds into the project.

Councillor Hunt, discussing the Rural Farm Walk, complimented Nick Philp on the very successful and informative event. Nick Philp explained that they had invited all councillors, parish councillors and a number of local landowners to take part, which resulted in over 80 people attending.

The Chairman said that often people discovered events similar to this through 'word of mouth' and therefore it was important to circulate the date of the event next year soon. David Scott agreed that a date should be found for 2020's walk, which would take place in June. A date would be identified and a 'hold the date' message sent out.

APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

David Scott explained there were three options members of the forum could choose from when picking a Chairman moving forward. They could; stay the same and have a councillor as Chairman, have a joint Chairmanship which would be similar to the Parish Conference, or appoint someone from the farming community.

Councillor Coppinger expressed his support for the co-chair option as it worked well at Parish Conference. He also pointed out that someone from the farming community had previously helped work on the agenda for each meeting.

Geoffrey Copas put forward his support to have a co-chair, which was seconded by Councillors Cannon and Hunt.

It was agreed by the Forum that Councillor Bateson and William Emmett would co-chair the Rural Forum moving forward.

REVIEW OF TERMS OF REFERENCE

Geoffrey Copas believed that issues the Rural Forum discussed were important and that more councillors should attend meetings.

Barbara Story asked about the National Trust members that were part of the Terms of Reference, and was informed that although they rarely took up their position as members of the Forum they were always invited.

David Scott explained that there were three main areas of the borough that were predominantly rural and out of town centre areas, and that Parish representatives from these three areas could be part of the Forum if this was what members wanted. Members agreed that it should be up to two Parish representatives from each region, potentially with one being a member and one a substitute.

Geoffrey Copas asked if there could be representatives from the Local Land Agency Association, with one representative being part of the membership for the Forum. The Forum decided it would invite a representative from the LLA when relevant items were on the agenda.

REFRESH OF FORUM MEMBERSHIP

Discussed as part of the item above.

RURAL CRIME UPDATE

Inspector Louise Warbrick gave members an update on rural crime around the borough.

With respect to unauthorised incursions she explained that for a Section 61 notice to be given, 3 key positions had to prevail:

- Threatening/abusive/aggressive behaviour or action
- Criminal damage
- Six or more vehicles

Other factors that were also taken into account included things such as public safety and prevention of crime and disorder. Human rights legislation was also important, as the police had to consider all the groups involved and ensure that the law was applied correctly and fairly. Once an incident had been reported, TVP conducted a daily site assessment and reviewed the circumstances to see if it fitted the Section 61 criteria. Guidance was available from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government which detailed what each group could do and it was recommended the advice would be useful for landowners and farmers.

Councillor Hunt asked what rights trespassers had. She was told that TVP had to follow legislation and human rights law. However, evidence collected from previous unauthorised incursions regarding the same group can be used pre-emptively to predict what problems they may cause at a new site and be used as part of the new site assessment and review.

Councillor Hunt said that she had heard from residents that had phoned the police to report issues with trespassers but had concerns that all the information gathered was not collectively put together with different police forces.

Inspector Louise Warbrick explained that it was rare for that to happen and that information was normally shared. To date, there had been 13 encampments across the borough this year, and all had multiple pieces of evidence against them. The problem might be that an incursion might not meet the criteria, for example if there was less than six vehicles. It can also be hard to identify those responsible.

Councillor Hunt asked if crime had increased as a result of the travellers, but there was no direct link. Inspector Louise Warbrick said that often 'cross border' criminals were to blame for rural crime, which made it harder to track them.

David Scott confirmed that RBWM had been working closely with TVP to make sure crimes were reported properly, with the response time improving in October when there had unusually been three unauthorised incursions in the borough.

The Panel noted the update.

TREES NEAR THE HIGHWAY AND TPOS ON AGRICULTURAL LAND

Helen Leonard, RBWM, explained the important role her team played in ensuring the borough's trees were deemed safe. Any trees that were considered a danger to the Highway, a Section 154 notice would be served to the landowner who would then have 14 days to take action, before RBWM did the work themselves and re-charged the landowner the cost.

Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) can be placed on trees to give them protection, with reasons usually being because of value to the local area, historical value or the relationship to the landscape and setting. On average, a couple of TPOs were made each month, with the oldest going back to 1951. Any part of a tree under a TPO that was causing a danger, for example dead branches, can be removed under exceptions, but the Tree Team needed to be advised before works were undertaken unless it was considered an emergency and evidence of the emergency is provided.

Geoffrey Copas commented that more communication was needed between councillors, landowners and the tree team. He had been told that ploughing his field could damage tree roots, but this had not been made clear. Helen Leonard said that they do not consult with landowners before issuing a TPO and that there was time for discussion after the TPO had been implemented.

Barbara Story asked if there were different categories, to which she was told that there were four; for stand-alone, groups, areas of land and woodland. She also asked what the policy was for when trees are cut down, and used the example from the planning department, who aimed to plant two trees in replacement. Helen Leonard confirmed that standard policy was one tree planted for each one cut down but this depended on the site and the site application plans.

Other concerns raised by members of the forum included trees that blocked sightlines on dangerous corners. An example was the A308 and how hedges and trees had caused the road to have particularly bad sightlines but nothing had been done. Helen Leonard informed members that contractors inspected all roads once a year and had the power to issue a Section 154 order on any dangerous or overgrown trees. However, a landowner cannot be forced to cut back more than the regulation. Helen Leonard confirmed she was happy to discuss specific concerns after the meeting.

UPDATE FROM THE FARMING COMMUNITY

Nick Philp gave members an update from the farming community. He discussed the Agriculture Bill, which would now not be passed until next year due to the upcoming General Election. Harvest had generally been good, but autumn was particularly wet with 150% more rainfall occurring than the average for the season. Since mid-September, there had been around 10 inches of rainfall.

The price of milk had been mainly consistent, but there had been a significant oversupply of beef due to imports from Ireland. This had placed pressure on farmers and they were currently making a loss on cattle.

Pork had started to make money as there was currently a shortage of pig meat. Lamb was uncertain due to the Brexit situation, 30% of lamb was exported and leaving the EU would mean big tariffs would come into place.

Fly tipping was still a problem for landowners across the borough. Sightlines caused by trees were also a problem and Nick Philp hoped more could be done to sort these issues out.

Members noted the update.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Paul Rinder informed members that there was a 'tractor run' being planned to be held on 9th February, finishing on the Long Walk in the Great Park near Windsor Castle. The run would use country roads and farm tracks, with money raised going to local charities including the Thames Valley Hospice. He needed to confirm the details of the event with RBWM and TVP but was hopefully that there would be no problems.

William Emmett asked about the upcoming M4 closure dates and if these were publically available. David Scott said that information would be available on the M4 Smart Motorway website with all information on any closures that would be taking place.

It was suggested that any ideas for future agenda items be emailed to democratic.services@rbwm.gov.uk.

DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Members noted the date of the next meeting.

The meeting, which began at 5.30 pm, finished at 7.15 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....