

RURAL FORUM

THURSDAY, 12 MARCH 2020

PRESENT: Councillors Christine Bateson (Co-Chair), Maureen Hunt, David Cannon and Samantha Rayner

Also in attendance: Geoffrey Copas, Liz Hadden, Paul Rinder, Alan Keene, Tim Parry, Matthew Sell, William Emmett (Co-Chair), Michael Craig, Nick Philp and Anne Keene

Officers: David Scott and Mark Beeley

CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The Co-Chairman Councillor Bateson and William Emmett welcomed everyone to the meeting.

They invited those present to introduce themselves.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Barbara Story, Louise Warbrick and Councillor Coppinger.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; That the minutes of the meeting held on 11th November 2019 were approved as a true record.

GREEN AGENDA/CARBON NEUTRAL TARGETS

Chris Joyce, Head of Infrastructure, Sustainability and Economic Growth, explained that RBWM had declared a climate emergency. The main purpose of this was to create energy targets, lobby government and create a cross party working group to help tackle the problem. Chris Joyce said that he had been supporting the group since August and it had held a number of public meetings. A climate change draft strategy had been agreed, with an aim for Cabinet to consider it in May and Full Council in June.

There was a number of themes that made up the strategy and each one had actions and objectives that set out what needed to be done. It was important to get ideas from the community and a number of roadshows had taken place where the strategy had been discussed to get input and feedback. There would be another opportunity to give feedback as part of a public consultation later in the year.

A question was asked to clarify what carbon neutral and net zero actually meant. Chris Joyce said that it was primarily about getting emissions down to zero and ensuring that no carbon was produced. Every industry was being encouraged to move towards this.

Another question asked how the borough would be ensuring that it did as much as possible to be carbon neutral. Chris Joyce said there would be a focus on the council's activities and

things that RBWM had a direct control over. People travelling through the borough was something that was included in the carbon figure, but aviation was not.

William Emmett, Co-Chairman, asked about the waste in RBWM and what happens to it. Chris Joyce said that waste was included in the carbon figure, while the aim was to reduce production and increase recycling services. There was constant comparison with other local authorities and there was evidence that some local authorities would be neutral by 2050 this was not the same across all areas of the UK.

Geffrey Copas suggested that there should be water turbines used in the Thames to ensure more sources of renewable energy. He made a further suggestion that all commercial buildings that were being built should be required to have solar panels on the roof.

Nick Philp asked about electric cars and whether there was the infrastructure available to support them. Chris Joyce said that it was a national level challenge and there it would need to be investigated how much capacity there was in the network before major steps were made.

Councillor Bateson said that Councillor Stimson was involved in many different groups as part of her role as Lead Member.

RURAL POLICING UPDATE

The Forum was informed that as Louise Warbrick had sent her apologies, there was no Rural Police Update.

Geoffrey Copas said that he did not think it was necessary to have the update at every meeting as it often covered the same topics. Alan Keene agreed and said that it would be better to have another interesting topic for the Rural Forum to consider.

It was agreed that it would be useful to have Councillor Stimson at the next meeting in November, to discuss her role as Lead Member for Environmental Services, Climate Change, Sustainability and Parks & Countryside.

UPDATE FROM THE FARMING COMMUNITY

William Emmett gave the Forum an update on the farming community. He started by talking about the tractor run which took place in February to raise money for Thames Hospice. Paul Rinder had put a lot of work into making the event a success, with over £15,000 raised and over 130 tractors taking part. The only disappointment was that RBWM were not prepared to waive the arrangement fee for road use.

In terms of farming, the weather over winter had been challenging. There had been around one metre of rainfall across the year and even in mid-March the water table was still very high. The River Thames had been managed well and as a result there had been very limited flooding that had affected farming. However, the upcoming harvest could be the smallest since the 1980s.

Government regulation was currently focussed around the Agriculture Bill and what would happen once the country had left the EU. Payments supporting agriculture will be phased out and replaced by 'public money for public goods'.

Another area that William Emmett picked out as a concern was the poor state of some roads around the borough. He said there needed to be more clarity on traffic levels especially as there has been cases where HGVs had been moved to B class roads in the south of the borough. Broadband was another issue and some areas of RBWM were still without access.

David Scott said that 98% of properties in the borough now had access to the internet and this would be further improved in phase 3 of the broadband roll out, which was due to be completed in 2021. He explained that for some areas it was more challenging to get them connected due to existing infrastructure, for example train lines.

Geoffrey Copas said that RBWM was forgetting about its rural areas and not enough funding was being focused on this area. He felt that there was also little support from planning officers for farmers that made applications to the council.

William Emmett said that in the Budget last week, the Chancellor said there was money available and so asked what RBWMs budget was for roads. David Scott said that the budget included money to manage the roads and that this was approved as part of the capital programme.

Councillor Rayner said that they would be able to look into whether the roads affected were part of the list of roads that had been earmarked in the budget.

Councillor Hunt expressed concern about the number of new homes that were being built near Bracknell but would use rural roads in RBWM to access major transport routes.

It was suggested that if Rural Forum members had any specific concerns or questions for officers than they could be submitted a few weeks before the next meeting in November, ensuring enough time was given for a written response.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

William Emmett said that he wished to see more councillors attend Rural Forum meetings. Geoffrey Copas agreed and suggested that the Forum should have reserves so that there was always a good amount of RBWM attendance. David Scott confirmed that as the Rural Forum was an outside body, they could make changes to the terms of reference if they wished.

Geoffrey Copas expressed his dissatisfaction with the RBWM planning department after some of his applications were rejected. He claimed that officers were not willing to meet him to discuss his proposals and asked if the Head of Planning would be able to attend a future meeting to answer questions that he had.

William Emmett informed those present of the recent meeting about the smart motorway works, which was disappointing. The person who had organised the meeting forgot to invite the contractors working on the M4. An Act of Parliament had given the contractors all the power to do as they wished and they had not yet got a surveyor. A significant number of trees had been destroyed during the works, and it was not yet clear whether the M4 would even open as a smart motorway pending the governments review into how safe they are.

Discussing the Rural Farm walk, Nick Philp said that it would be better to hold it every other year as there was not many Forum members that could host. Councillor Cannon said that councillors would benefit from having it the year after an election, rather than the same year when many councillors would be new to the post.

Liz Hadden confirmed that she would be happy to host the walk this year, Democratic Services would confirm details and communicate this with members of the Forum in due course.

DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Members noted the dates of future meetings.

The meeting, which began at 5.35 pm, finished at 7.10 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....