

RURAL FORUM

THURSDAY, 18 MARCH 2021

PRESENT: Councillors Christine Bateson, David Coppinger, Maureen Hunt, David Cannon, Gerry Clark and Samantha Rayner

Also in attendance: Councillors John Baldwin, Gurpreet Bhangra, Sayonara Luxton, Shamsul Shelim, Gurch Singh and Donna Stimson, Doug Grant, Alan Keene, Charlotte Elliott, Nick Philp, Liz Hadden, Mark Hemmings, Mary Fallon, Simon Rinder, James Copas, Annie Keene, Barbara Story, April Rinder, William Emmett, Kim Sherman, Andrew Randall and Geoffrey Copas

Officers: Andy Carswell, Sharon Wootten and David Scott

CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and asked those present to introduce themselves.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on March 12th 2020 be approved as an accurate record.

RURAL POLICING UPDATE

Sergeant Doug Grant introduced himself to the Forum as the recently appointed Neighbourhood Sergeant for Maidenhead South and Windsor East. He explained tackling rural crime was a new concept for him, and he was in the process of compiling a problem profile relating to rural crime in order to identify particular issues and where resources might be needed. He said crimes would be reported in different ways; some incidents might be reported as antisocial behaviour rather than as a crime being committed. Members were reminded to call 999 if a crime was in progress, or 101 if there was something to be reported that did not require immediate intervention.

William Emmett said there had been six incidents on his land in the previous two weeks, relating to hare coursing or people driving vehicles over farmland. He said hare coursing was difficult to counteract because those involved were often able to get away quickly. However there had been police intervention at one incident where he had managed to keep the hare coursers distracted while officers arrived. William Emmett said he was aware of a Subaru Forester vehicle that had been seen at hare coursing events and would pass on the registration plate once he was able to confirm it. He said tractor theft was also an issue. William Emmett said he was pleased Sergeant Grant was taking the issue of rural crime seriously and said the farming community would work with the police if they responded to

them. Sergeant Grant said he had ideas on improving lines of communication with the farming community. He said he would be the main contact point for rural crime in the Royal Borough.

Regarding theft of farming machinery, Sergeant Grant said this was being monitored as a matter of urgency to see if there was a pattern or series to the thefts. If something was identified then dedicated patrols could be set up. It was confirmed that the National Farmers' Union still had a policing body that assisted with recovering stolen machinery, and there had been schemes funded in the past to mark vehicles. In relation to hare coursing, Sergeant Grant said a dog used in coursing had recently been seized and so had some vehicles, which acted as a deterrent and disrupted the practice.

Cllr Rayner said statistics showed rates of violent crime and burglary were down 20 per cent in her ward, and asked if there was a similar pattern for rural crime. Sergeant Grant said issues with quad and scrambler illegally riding on farmland had been a persistent problem, and a number of vehicles had been seized and warnings given. He said Covid had reduced some crime levels, and there was no evidence to suggest town centre burglars were focussing instead on rural burglaries.

Cllr Cannon asked if there was a specific operation in place to stop vehicles that were not road legal from riding on fields and farmland. Sergeant Grant said there was something planned but he could not go into further details for operational reasons. He said it may be possible to put items of street furniture in certain places to prevent vehicles accessing land.

Responding to a question from Barbara Story, Sergeant Grant said theft of animals was not something that was known to be a particular issue.

Sergeant Grant said 101 calls or reports on the website were not always picked up on immediately, but the team or officer it should be sent to would be identified and the report sent on to them.

David Scott said he would assist with putting together a list of contact details from the farming community and forward these to Sergeant Grant. Members of the Forum thanked Sergeant Grant for attending.

UPDATE FROM THE FARMING COMMUNITY

Nick Philp gave a presentation to members about how the Covid19 pandemic had affected farming operations over the past year. Despite the pandemic animals still needed to be looked after and crops harvested. In many cases work could still be carried out with adequate levels of distancing between workers; however abattoirs had suffered badly with Covid due to the cold temperatures. Demand for some products increased during lockdown and there were supply shortages as some foods could not be processed quickly enough. For example there was not enough packaging for flour to be put into 1kg bags for home baking, rather than 25kg bags for use in catering.

The Forum was told cereal prices were 20 per cent higher than the same time last year, as the harvest had been the smallest in 40 years. Last year 9.5 million tons of grain had been produced, compared to an average of 14.5 million. As a result the UK had been a net importer of wheat. The dairy market had been stable for farmers supplying supermarkets, but it had collapsed for those who were supplying the catering industry and some firms had gone close to going out of business. Recently things had restabilised however. Beef and lamb prices were 15 per cent higher than the previous year, but pork prices had dropped 30 per cent. This was because there was lower capacity in abattoirs. It was thought some pork producers could go out of business within the next six months.

The impact of Brexit on the farming industry was still unknown at the moment, but it was hoped the picture would be clearer by the time of the next Forum meeting. The new Agricultural Bill had been passed, and farming subsidies would be phased out by 2027, to be

replaced by environmental schemes. Geoffrey Copas said the Agricultural Bill would encourage some farmers not to grow food but instead use fields for grazing animals, and it was unclear how this would work and what long-term issues there may be. Cllr Stimson said she would be happy to get more information on this for a future meeting, as Environmental Land Management schemes would be changing as a result of the UK leaving the European Union. Nick Philp said it was unclear from Defra what the ELM schemes would be like in the future.

Geoffrey Copas said it would be interesting to know what elected Councillors and members of the public wanted to see happen to farmland in terms of accessibility. As an example, he asked if people were still interested in using stables and riding horses across countryside. Cllr Rayner suggested a working group could get together before the November meeting and explore the framework and possible opportunities. David Scott said the new Director of Place might be interested in terms of the impact this would have on planning. He said he would raise it with him.

PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY

Nick Philp introduced the item with a presentation, explaining that the Covid19 pandemic had led to a large increase in footfall around the countryside and put pressure on the infrastructure. A number of photos were included in the presentation slides highlighting some of the issues. This included people going off footpaths and onto land being used to produce crops, resulting in the crops being trampled and destroyed. Another example showed footprints and horse hoofprints in a field that was not open to the public. Nick Philp stated that the landowner had put up signs saying the land was private property, but these were torn down and thrown in the hedge within 48 hours.

Dogs worrying livestock was a problem nationally. Most of the time this was due to the naivety of dog walkers but would often lead to situations where livestock ended up being injured. Nick Philp said he had had a situation recently where a professional dog walker had let a dog off a lead in a field of ewes and newborn lambs. Farmers were encouraged to put up warning signs of animals in fields as they were protective of young offspring. The presentation showed three examples where walkers had been trampled to death by cattle, after they had crossed directly through the field rather than going round the edge.

Nick Philp stated his belief there needed to be a more resilient footpath network made of hardstanding, due to the increase in popularity of walking. He said there was often bureaucracy that prevented easy diversion of footpaths. Sharon Wootten, Public Rights of Way Officer, said the Council were tightly bound by legislation and it would be for a landowner to provide a persuasive argument for an alternative footpath if one was no longer considered suitable. A scheme would be more likely to succeed if a landowner approached the Rights of Way team and worked with them to find a solution.

Geoffrey Copas said a solution could be to have a number of permitted footpaths, which could be opened and closed depending on demand and whether the path was accessible. This was preferable to suggesting an alternative path, because if there was even one objection then it would need to be referred to an appeal. Geoffrey Copas said he had been in a situation previously where he had had to go to an appeal as there had been two objections; one person had refused to withdraw their objection and the other said they would withdraw if there were no other objections. He said objections were often raised by the Ramblers' Association, although they were more amenable than they had been in the past. Sharon Wootten suggested the Council's Rights of Way Panel and Local Access Forum were good ways to discuss proposed alterations to footpaths and said she was happy to assist anyone who needed help, or, in the case of the Local Access Forum, wanted to become members.

Alan Keene asked if greater favour could be given to planning applications to landowners who involved themselves in rights of way and improving footpath networks. Cllr Coppinger said there were different sets of legislation governing planning and rights of way and could not see

how the two could be connected. Alan Keene said it could be seen as frustrating if opportunities to improve the rights of way network due to planning law. Cllr Cannon said he would discuss this with Planning.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

William Emmett said there had been 11 elected Councillors present during the meeting, and said he was pleased so many had attended. Cllr Rayner said virtual meetings enabled more people to participate.

Alan Keene said the Royal East Berkshire Agricultural Association was planning a programme of events. The ploughing match at Church Farm in Waltham St Lawrence would be taking place on September 26th.

Cllr Rayner said it would be good for Councillors to meet and understand more about farming. It was agreed she would liaise with Cllr Stimson to discuss the arrangements for this.

DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The dates of the next two meetings were noted.

The meeting, which began at 5.30 pm, finished at 6.58 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....