

RURAL FORUM

WEDNESDAY, 23 MARCH 2022

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

Also in attendance: Councillor Mandy Brar, Councillor Ewan Larcombe and Councillor Andrew Johnson, Nick Philp, Geoffery Copas, Alan Keene, Annie Keene, Mark Hemmings, Colin Rayner, Barbara Story, Elizabeth Hadden, William Westacott

Officers: Laurence Ellis, Oran Norris-Browne and David Scott

CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson welcomed the Forum to the meeting.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Councillor David Cannon, Phillip Mortimer, Mary Fallon, William Emmett and James Copas.

David Scott, Head of Communities, read out William Emmett's letter of resignation as co-chair of the Forum.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Rayner declared she was a farmer and a Councillor.

MINUTES

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 30th November 2021 were a true and accurate record.

Proposed by Alan Keene. Seconded by Councillor Hunt.

RURAL CRIME UPDATE

Sergeant Andy Ward, from Thames Valley Police, gave a verbal update on rural crime. Since the last meeting held on 30th November 2021, there were 28 incidents flagged as rural crime incidents. When breaking down these reported incidents, hare coursing was the biggest recorded issue reported to Thames Valley Police (TVP) with 18 incidents being related to hare coursing.

While two reported incidents have been recorded as hare coursing, other reported incidents such as wildlife hunting offences, suspicious vehicles or persons, and criminal damages had been related to the issue of hare coursing.

In the same timespan (since November 2022), roughly 800 domestic incidents were reported to Thames Valley Police. While these numbers were relatively low in comparison to other crime types, it was suspected that there were more incidents going on which were undetected or underreported to TVP.

Sergeant Andy Ward stated that TVP had been working with Alan Keene around developing a WhatsApp group with the local community in RBWM; the group had over 40 members. Sergeant Andy Ward mentioned that he had cross-referenced all the information from this WhatsApp group, and they all referred to incidents that had been reported to TVP.

Sergeant Andy Ward then discussed the rural crime task force. On 8th March 2022, they did some targeted patrols and linked up with local officers. They also took the opportunity to speak to some local farmers. As a local team and with consultation with William Emmett and other local farmers, TVP have been working with the rural crime taskforce to develop its existing rural operation. This would involve changing from conducting hotspot patrols to do something more targeted.

Sergeant Andy Ward added that TVP were also looking into training local officers in the use of off-road vehicles to enable better capabilities with patrols and police action. They were also looking into pulling its local resources alongside other local police areas to promote more collaborated local operations across the areas.

After expressing appreciation to the police for their actions, Geoffrey Copas gave an update to the Forum of a recent meeting between farmers and the police, organised by David Scott on 8th March. He stated the most important point to report from the meeting was the change in approach in the police of being prepared to meet farmers, which Geoffrey Copas approved, and believed the meeting was the best way to resolve crime.

He added that at the end of the meeting, when farmers were asked if there should be another meeting with the police, no hands were raised. Geoffrey Copas stated that this suggested the farmers were satisfied with the police's action.

On hare coursing, Geoffrey Copas mentioned it definitely occurred south of Maidenhead because of the existence of large open fields.

Councillor Hunt asked if there was any idea of the perpetrators of hare coursing. Sergeant Andy Ward replied that the main focus of TVP, working alongside the rural crime taskforce, was to identify and catch the perpetrators in the act. He then stated that the perpetrators were not necessarily local; rather there was a proportion of people going across areas to commit rural crime offences. One reason how this was known was because vehicles could be found which were linked to other areas, which also added the complexity of the problem.

William Westacott asked what was TVP's definition of rural crime; elaborating by then asking whether a burglary of a grain storage or farm building would be recorded as a burglary or rural crime. Sergeant Andy Ward answered that the definition was broad; whereby a burglary at a farm and hunting offences would be classified as rural crime. To give an example, he stated that six recorded burglary/thefts came under the definition of rural crime.

The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson asked about the theft of machinery. Sergeant Andy Ward replied that there had not been a prevalence of those types of offences reported to TVP. He reiterated the largest proportion of reported crimes were related to or were suspected to be hare coursing. He then stated that theft did not seem to be a major issue in Windsor and Maidenhead.

Barbara Story, southern Parish Councils' representative on the Forum, asked if there were cases of animal theft. Sergeant Andy Ward replied that there had not any reported animal thefts in the last three months.

Having attended the police-farmer meeting, Councillor Rayner suggested another similar meeting could be held in the future, stating farming was important in the Borough and that and RBWM should whatever it could to help out local farmers.

In reference to the police-farmer meeting, Alan Keene stated that the lack of raised hands over having a follow-up meeting should be “taken with a pinch of salt” that this was a lack of support for a follow-up meeting. He stated that he had discussion with David Scott and there were plans to have a follow-up meeting.

Alan Keene then asked Sergeant Andy Ward that there had been mentions in the rural crime WhatsApp group of vehicles being seized and wondered what happened to those vehicles. Sergeant Andy Ward answered that a seized vehicle related to one of the incidents mentioned in the police-farmer meeting in March had been disposed. All the completed inquiries in the investigation of that incident meant TVP had the lawful authority to destroy the vehicle.

Alan Keene then followed up by asking if Sergeant Andy Ward knew anything about a specific incident in which Alan Keene was involved in whereby a neighbour of his was told that the vehicle was seized in Essex. Sergeant Andy Ward replied that he did not know the answer but was willing to give him the details later.

Geoffrey Copas commented that farmers had been increasingly protective of their machinery as they had become more aware of machinery being stolen. On hare coursing, Geoffrey Copas stated that it was to be expected for trenches to be dug around fields and lumps of concrete and machinery to be placed in gateways to stop trespassers. After talking with William Emmett, the Forum Co-Chair, Geoffrey Copas raised the issue that there had been cases of offenders buying cheap, unregistered cars and then having car rallies around farmers' fields.

David Scott commented that the police-farmer meeting held in March came across as successful. The meeting was well attended and gave farmers the opportunity to report incidents they had experienced. Based on the meeting, he stated that the reported rural crime incidents fell into three categories. Firstly, many cases of hare coursing. Secondly, car rallies in fields in which usually damage fields and sometimes cause fires. Thirdly, trespassing on farmland by people.

David Scott then asked Sergeant Andy Ward for a summary of the rural crime taskforce. Andy Ward answered that it was a central department at TVP which had a series of resources. They worked at flexible hours so they could respond to particular trends or serious incidents. The taskforce also had capabilities of research, investigation and intelligence in regard to rural crime incidents. In terms of structure of the department, the taskforce had an inspector, a sergeant and about 10 constables alongside some civilian investigators.

Councillor Coppinger asked if rural crime was particularly focused in certain geographical areas, citing a conversation he had with a couple of local farmers where they gave the impression that it was only in their farming areas in which there was crime. Andy Ward answered that rural crime was recorded across the Borough. He added that, in terms of the figures, rural crime was low compared to other types of crime.

Alan Keene gave an answer. He said there seemed to be a concentration of activity around the Drift Road area but added that this was anecdotal as he did not have factual evidence. He then said that a suggested reason was because hare coursing could only occur in large fields with hares. In other parts of the Borough, there were no hares and the fields were smaller; therefore, they were not suitable for hare coursing.

UPDATE FROM THE FARMING COMMUNITY

Geoffrey Copas gave a verbal update. He started off by stating that the reason for the existence of the Rural Forum was because roughly 82% of Borough was countryside. Being the managers and owners of countryside, who had little representation on the Council, the farming community needed to be given the opportunity to express their views and interests to councillors and local people who have an interest in the countryside. According to Geoffrey Copas, both had little rural knowledge to make better informed decisions on the countryside

and to be fully aware of the impact of their decisions on the future of the countryside. He reminded the panel that it was farmers who created the countryside by clearing forests as well as utilised it to produce food. The farmers were successful in creating and maintaining the countryside that urban dwellers designated it as a greenbelt.

Geoffrey Copas stated farmers did not want the whole countryside to be developed because they wish to farm it to produce food as long as their farming business remained viable and sustainable. He expressed concern of a vocal minority who wished to “preserve every inch” of the greenbelt. He argued that the countryside had always changed to meet societal needs, which had increased, and then conveyed some examples to support this statement.

Geoffrey Copas acknowledged that more land was needed to meet societal needs – housing, employment, sport and transport – and major decisions would be made which would not satisfy everyone but were nevertheless accepted as the will of a democratic-majority. With that said, he expressed concern that single-issue actions groups cherry-pick facts and information to justify their cause and ignore the side effects. He also expressed concern of these action groups using modern communications and technology to influence decision makers, which could lead to governance by minority and “lynch mob decisions”.

Geoffrey Copas rhetorically asked if local councils wanted farming to remain in the main use of the greenbelt countryside, citing that there was currently one dairy farm (owned by the Crown Estate) compared to 30 dairy farms in his youth. While Geoffrey Copas believed there was a desire for farming to remain, he stated it was important for local councils to make this loud and clear.

Geoffrey Copas also added that for farms to continue, farmers had to be viable and sustainable, which was easier in areas of countryside where it was not designated as greenbelt as the interests of national parks, second homeowners and single-issue action groups was what prevented changes in greenbelt. He also mentioned that Brexit, the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine had created changes which affected farmers.

Geoffrey Copas asserted that the question that needed to be considered was not only how the greenbelt was contained but who was going to do this, where was this person going to live, who was going to pay for it, and what was the greenbelt going to be used for. Based on this, he argued that the Rural Forum should be used as a way to improve decisions on the future on the greenbelt countryside.

Geoffrey Copas stated that it was important that meetings do not use individual people’s particular problems or cases as well as certain principles which he believed should not be considered, conveying a few case examples to support his argument.

Geoffrey Copas wondered whether the planning decision process needed to be reviewed. He cited that a reason why farmers’ planning applications were turned down was because of a lack of an ecological report provided by the farmer. He also cited a case of a farmer whose planning application was unanimously turned down despite providing a planning application.

Alongside the changing farming scene, Geoffrey Copas alongside Nick Philp, stated there was a rise in costs for resources which farmers used, such as fuel and fertiliser. He also added that the value in food which farmers produced had increased, such as wheat and barley, which was good news for farmers’ profitability.

While not a large concern in RBWM, Geoffrey Copas raised the issue of the pig industry whereby a pig loses 30% of its value for every pig that killed, resulting in farmers losing money when selling pigs. He also added that 40,000 pigs had been killed and disposed because too many pigs were on farms and a lack of demand. Geoffrey Copas also mentioned that TB (Bovine Tuberculosis) amongst cattle was rapidly spreading and was nearly on the Borough boundary.

Geoffrey Copas also raised awareness that Widbrook Common, a recreation area where wildflowers grew and blossomed, had not been grazed for the first time, which had the potential to destroy the wildflowers.

Geoffrey Copas stated that it was challenging time for farmers who had to spend most of their time trying to remain viable and sustainable following the loss of £80 per acre, and therefore had little time to justify their existence in their area, surrounded and controlled by non-farmers who want cheap food.

Geoffrey Copas hoped the Rural Forum meetings would continue but made a couple of suggestions. Firstly, he suggested that the agendas should be planned prior to the next meeting. Secondly, for the rural walk in June, he proposed a tour of the greenbelt countryside, visiting his family farm sites and land, and then visit Battlemead Common.

Geoffrey Copas rhetorically asked if the Council was going to take on responsibility of maintaining more of the greenbelt countryside in the future, reiterating that the countryside had always been maintained by farmers.

(Councillor Johnson entered the meeting as a guest)

Geoffrey Copas said it was important that more Councillors were more aware of the concerns and interests of farmers. If more Councillors were unable to attend the Rural Forum meetings, he suggested that the points that were raised should be circulated amongst Councillors to raise awareness of concerns from the farming community.

Geoffrey Copas proposed to invite every Councillor and their partners to the rural walk in June and proposed a date of 28th June.

Councillor Hunt asked the farmers in the Forum meeting if they believed Geoffrey Copas made pertinent points on the concerns of the farming community. Nick Philp confirmed this. Councillor Hunt then reassured the Council were supportive of the greenbelt and farmers.

ACTION: Geoffrey Copas to send a copy of his farming community update to David Scott, who would then circulate this to Councillors.

The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson asked if the rural walks (which were usually scheduled in June) could take place before autumn, such as in September, when it was election year as the elections meant there would be a change in Councillors and therefore a change in committee and forum members. Geoffrey Copas replied that June was the best time as it fits in the farmers' schedule as well as the fact it takes place after elections in May.

Councillor Coppinger asked if Geoffrey Copas could inform him further on the latter's thoughts on open spaces going forward, potentially through a meeting video. Geoffrey Copas was willing to do this.

Councillor Rayner agreed with Geoffrey Copas to discuss the agenda items before the meetings.

Alan Keene requested that the date for the rural walk not be set-in-stone as it came close to clashing with a Royal East Berkshire Agricultural Association (REBAA) event. He also added that REBAA fully supported the rural walk and was happy to contribute to the costs. The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson was fine with this.

After the Co-Chair Councillor Bateson mentioned that many Parish Councillors attended the last farm walk, Geoffrey Copas said he would invite Parish Councillors to the upcoming farm walk in June 2022 and hoped to make this standard procedure.

Alan Keene asked the Forum if it was really a good balance if there were more farmers than Councillors as there had been in the last couple of rural walks, stating that the rural visits were for Councillors' benefit of experiencing the farms and countryside. The Co-Chair replied that this had to be decided amongst the farmers.

David Scott advised that if the Forum wished to have as many Councillors and farmers as possible attend the farm walk, then it had to be scheduled either during the meeting or in the immediate future.

ACTION: Schedule a date for the annual rural farm walk in June and invite all Borough Councillors and Parish Councillors to attend.

FUTURE MEETING ARRANGEMENTS

David Scott introduced the item. After a review of the Rural Forum, the Council decided to make the Rural Forum an outside body rather than a formal council meeting. He also added that the renewal of the municipal year (1st May) and William Emmett's resignation as Co-Chair gave the Rural Forum an opportunity to reflect upon itself.

David Scott then stated that after having discussions with Forum members, there needed to be a clear understanding of the membership of the Forum. He reminded the Forum that there were two groups of members: 6 elected Councillors, nominated by the Council, and a group of 10 organisations on the list. These organisations included the National Trust, BCA (Berkshire College of Agriculture), Woodland Managers, Country Landowners Association, the Crown Estate, CPRE (Campaign to Protect Rural England), NFU (National Farmers' Union), Smallholders' Association, Parish Councils, and officers of the Council. He added that while there were other groups who had an interest, there needed to be caution around groups who have single-issue interests and wider interests.

David Scott also stated it was ideal that there was robust attendance at the Forum meetings to ensure they were being well used as a basis of policy development as well as provide dialogue between the Council and members from the rural community.

David Scott suggested that the Forum could hold another meeting before the next meeting on 29th November if they believed it was appropriate as November was a long time away.

With the new municipal year approaching, the Forum would need to decide on the next chair of the Rural Forum. He also endorsed the suggestion of having agenda planning meetings prior to the scheduled Forum meetings; though he added that they would probably best if they were more formal rather than through email.

The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson commented the organisations that were usually invited never attend, and that the farmers should decide on which groups should attend. Alan Keene replied that farmers were not really responsible for the groups listed. He also added that Royal East Berkshire Agricultural Association (REBAA), the organisation which he represented, did not have a formal role in the Forum and followed that he would ask for REBAA to have a formal role, which could help with coordinating the farming input. Alan Keene also gave the view that the Rural Forum was focused on farming and not so much on non-farming rural people.

ACTION: David Scott to invite representatives from various rural-based group to attend Rural Forum meetings.

Geoffrey Copas made a few suggestions on the arrangements for future Forum meetings. He commented that it would be better if there were more farm and landowners becoming members of the Forum, reiterating that these people managed the countryside. He also reiterated that it was important to get as many Councillors as possible to attend the Forum meetings as they were the ones who made the decisions.

(Councillor Clarke entered the meeting via virtual call)

Geoffrey Copas supported the principle of having a single chair for the Forum rather than a joint co-chair. He also expressed preference for the Forum chair to be a Councillor with a rural/farming background who would potentially hold the viewpoints of both Councillors and farmers; and followed by nominating Councillor Rayner as a potential candidate due to her farming background. Despite this, he expressed appreciation to the current Co-Chair Councillor Bateson for her chairmanship of the Rural Forum.

While agreeing with most of what Geoffrey Copas commented, Alan Keene added that having a chair and vice-chair was the standard procedure rather than a joint chair; and that chair and vice-chair should be a Councillor and non-Councillor for balance. He expressed disagreement that the chair must be a Councillor and believed the role chair and vice-chair should be open to anyone on the Forum.

Nick Philp asked if the election for the Forum chair would take place during the next Forum meeting in November 2022, which the Co-Chair Councillor Bateson confirmed.

Geoffrey Copas reiterated the issue of the declining number of farmers and agricultural labourers, which was putting pressure on farmers. He disagreed with the general comment from Councillors that it was farmers who should take action, asserting that there were fewer farmers. He then reiterated his original question on whether Councillors wanted agriculture to remain as the main use of the countryside, stating that a clear answer had not been given.

Geoffrey Copas believed that the Council needed to understand on whether it was a priority to get involved with the people who manage the rural land (82% of the Borough), as well as that they would have to be the main instigators to what would happen.

Councillors Coppinger and Rayner reassured Geoffrey Copas that the farming community was important to the Borough and that Councillors wished to preserve rural areas as much as they can and were supportive of the farming community.

Councillor Clarke commented that another purpose of the Rural Forum, alongside interfacing between farmers and councillors, was the promotion of the value of the Borough's farming and rural areas and making this message clear to residents. He believed there was a communication issue over the importance of rural areas to residents, namely the importance of the use of the land, the benefits this brought, and the stability and security this did to the countryside.

Councillor Clarke suggested that the Forum needed to better communicate to residents to ensure they understood what was within their Borough, how it was used, and how it was managed. In addition, the Forum needed to communicate the efforts the farming community went through to maintain open spaces, the countryside, the production of food and any other positive elements.

DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson asked for confirmation on an additional meeting in the summer. David Scott replied that there seemed to be a desire for an extra Rural Forum meeting before November 2022 as this was a long distance away. He also reiterated the plan to schedule the rural walk on 28th June 2022.

Geoffrey Copas raised the issue with having an extra meeting was that farmers had busy harvest schedules around August and September. Therefore, the meeting in November was a good time and it would be expected to have a better turnout from farmers.

Nick Philp stated it was probably best the current meeting structure – 2 meetings in March and November, and rural walk in June – remained the same as this was better for farmers; though he added that it would be preferably for the meeting scheduled in early-March rather than late-March. He also added that another reason for the low turnout for the Forum meeting was because of the sunny day and farmers would be working on their fields.

Barbara Story wondered if the timing of the meetings should change, whether earlier or later, as this could have an effect on the turnout of farmers.

Geoffrey Copas preferred the meetings were scheduled at 16:30 and that they took place at Maidenhead Town Hall rather than York House, Windsor.

The Rural Forum noted that the next meeting on 29th November would take place as a hybrid meeting in the Council Chamber at Maidenhead Town Hall.

Geoffrey Copas requested that chief planning officers be invited to the next meeting in November 2022 so they could explain how the Local Borough Plan affected farmers and how the countryside was to be managed.

Geoffrey Copas also raised concern of the uncertainty caused by the war in Ukraine and how this could impact farmers and the countryside, considering much agricultural commodities came from Ukraine as well as a potential settlement of Ukrainian refugees in Maidenhead.

ACTION: Invite the chief planning officers to explain the impact of the Local Borough Plan on farmers and the countryside.

The meeting, which began at 5.30 pm, finished at 7.13 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....