

RURAL FORUM

Tuesday 29 November 2022

Present: Councillors Samantha Rayner (Chairman), David Coppinger, Maureen Hunt, David Cannon, Andrew Johnson, and Gerry Clark (virtually)

Also in attendance: William Emmett (Vice-Chairman) (virtually), Geoffrey Copas (virtually), Alan Keene, Annie Keene, William Westacott, Nick Philp, Nick Manderfield, James Copas, Elizabeth Hadden, Parish Councillor Barbara Story, Tim Parry (virtually), Rebecca Anderson (virtually), Daniel Bennett TVP, Councillor Mandy Brar (virtually), Councillor John Baldwin (virtually), Councillor Donna Stimson, and Councillor Phil Haseler

Officers: Laurence Ellis, Andrew Durrant, Jason Mills and James Thorpe

Chairman's Introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, and Forum members introduced themselves.

Apologies For Absence

Apologies received from Colin Rayner, Paul Rinder and Mark Hemmings.

Declaration Of Interest

Relating to the Biodiversity Paper item, the Chairman raised that her husband, Colin Rayner, was a farmer who owned land in the stewardship scheme.

Confirmation of Members of the Panel

Membership was noted during introductions and would be checked after the meeting.

Minutes

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 31st May 2022 were a true and accurate record.

Biodiversity Paper Update

James Thorpe, Sustainability and Climate Service Lead, gave a verbal update regarding the draft Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP). Based on the last meeting where the BAP was presented, he stated that it was clear that improvements were necessary, and he took the feedback from the last meeting to make some changes to the BAP. He accepted that there was a lack of engagement from the farming community.

James Thorpe then went through the changes to the BAP. One substantial change to the BAP in the Farmland Habitat Action Plan was that all actions in the plan were removed and replaced with one new action: to work jointly and in partnership with the Rural Forum and other key stakeholders in the Borough to develop a Farmland Habitat Action Plan that was suitable and fit for purpose as well as ambitious, deliverable and exciting.

(Councillor Cannon had entered the meeting at 5:43pm; Councillor Brar also entered the meeting virtually)

Regarding criticism by the Forum in which the data throughout the original draft BAP was scattered, the new draft BAP had an appendix at the end where the data was consolidated.

The language in the new draft BAP was altered to make it more inclusive and inspiring. Case studies were also added under each habitat action plan to provide examples of results.

James Thorpe also mentioned that he and Jason Mills, Natural Environment Manager, had made a commitment for either one or both of them to attend future Rural Forum meetings to update the Forum on the BAP.

James Thorpe also informed that the formatting had been improved to make it clearer and engaging. Further changes to the format and design would be made to the BAP if approved by Cabinet in the following month.

Geoffrey Copas made some comments regarding the new draft BAP. He criticised the document as not being public friendly due to its length. He also criticised that the draft BAP appeared to be created in collaboration with conservation groups, stating that most of the land was owned and managed by farmers. Geoffrey Copas also criticised the statistics on the land, such as the objective for 30% of the Borough land to be reserved for nature while the draft BAP stated that woodland represented 33% of the land. He also criticised that the document did not include any mention of DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) funding to farmers. Geoffrey Copas concluded that the new draft BAP was disappointing.

The Chairman suggested that Geoffrey Copas could forward his comments on the draft BAP so that a more substantial response could be given.

James Thorpe responded to some of Geoffrey Copas's comments. He stated that page numbers could be added to the BAP. Regarding DEFRA funding, he stated that the farms in stewardship schemes were included in the '30 by 30' section of the draft BAP; and if this and the DEFRA policy changed, he would update the Forum. He stated he could answer the comments further after the meeting.

Alan Keene stated he welcomed the new draft BAP as an improvement compared to the old one. He stated the sections on farming were clearer and was appreciative with the addition of case studies.

Commenting that the BAP was delayed by 2 years in being adopted, Councillor Baldwin stated that he was concerned with the removal of Farmland Habitat Action Plan and that this would be discussed in 2023. He asked how this would affect planning decisions in upcoming Planning meetings. James Thorpe replied that the Planning Team would have the answer regarding how the absence of Farmland Habitat Action Plan would affect Planning meetings. Regarding the delay, he stated it was not a sustainable position to retain the original BAP and that it was important for farmers to be bought into the plan. He also stated that tackling the biodiversity crisis was a long-term task and that he would be working with the Rural Forum.

Councillor Baldwin followed up by asking about what the mechanism would be in which residents and Councillors would be updated on the actions in the BAP. James Thorpe replied that he and Jason Mills would be attending future Rural Forum meetings in which they would report back on the progress of the actions in the BAP. Councillor Baldwin replied that updating with interim measures in the BAP during Rural Forum meeting was insufficient. James Thorpe responded that he would respond when appropriate across the whole BAP in terms of the implementation. He explained that once approved by Cabinet, an implementation plan would be developed in 2023, and therefore update residents. James Thorpe also stated that he would update residents when appropriate, and he believed that Rural Forum was a good opportunity to consult with farmers.

Vice-Chairman William Emmett stated he would be happy to keep James Thorpe updated on the improvements on biodiversity within the Borough during the interim of Rural Forum meetings, especially as there were some changes on the environmental schemes.

Councillor Hunt believed that the new BAP was an improvement and appreciated the work done by the officers. She requested that officers report back to the Rural Forum on any changes in the BAP.

(Councillor Clark entered the meeting virtually at 6:06pm)

Councillor Stimson expressed appreciation for the work that officers had been doing to improve the draft BAP, arguing that it was better for the BAP to be implemented late but right rather than on time but wrong.

Geoffrey Copas stated that he asked a while ago for the tree officer to visit his farm to observe the tree planting that had taken place across his farmland. He also asked if farmers had read the entirety of the draft BAP. Andrew Durrant replied that he would look into arranging a visit to Geoffrey Copas's farm. The Chairman asked the farmers of the Forum if they had read the entirety of draft BAP, to which the Forum confirmed.

Councillor Baldwin stated he was concerned about Rural Forum members sharing their insights with officers outside of the meeting as well as believing the Forum had seemingly become the "*de facto* arena" to discuss segments of the BAP. He asked what mechanism were in place to ensure any changes were shared with other Councillors.

James Thorpe replied that he and his team had consultations and worked with a variety people and stakeholders across the Borough, such as the various Wilds groups and the Rural Forum. He stated he and his team would continue to reflect a broad interest of people.

The Chairman concluded that the draft BAP would be forwarded to Cabinet in December 2022.

Update From The Farming Community

Daniel Bennett, Geographical Neighbourhood Inspector for Windsor and Maidenhead from Thames Valley Police (TVP), gave a verbal update on rural crime. He stated rural crime was embedded into the strategic plan of TVP, which led to the creation of the Rural Crime Taskforce. In terms of structure, this taskforce had a superintendent, chief inspector, inspector, 2 sergeants and 10 police constables divided into 2 teams. The Taskforce also included dedicated detective resource in order to conduct investigations alongside dealing with responsive crimes.

Daniel Bennett then gave an overview on the situation with rural crime:

- 51 recorded crimes between September 2021 to August 2022, the fifth lowest within Thames Valley (behind Slough, Oxford and Milton Keynes).
- Since 2019, there had been an increase of rural crimes being reported to TVP.
- In the last 11 months, there had been a 6% increase in formal action being taken to crime reporting. However, it was acknowledged that there was a decrease or lack of formal action being taken in the last 4 months, in which TVP were looking in to.
- Local analysis (attached to the Neighbourhood Team and Rural Crime Taskforce) identified that Maidenhead West was a crime hotspot, prominently criminal damage (i.e., damage to gates, fences and vehicles) linked to hare coursing. Specific areas identified were Cookham and Shurlock Row.
- TVP had undertaken some self-assessment regarding its performance. It had been acknowledged that there had been an increase in reported crimes year-on-year and that there had been a lack of formal action in the last 4 months. In addition, there had been a lack of community confidence on occasion which Daniel Bennett believed may have been

partially caused by a relevant individual, who was in charge of TV alerts, leaving as well as Mike Darren stepping down as the Geographical Neighbourhood Inspector in August 2022.

- TVP were also working on how to improve its response to the rural crime WhatsApp group.
- The neighbourhood teams had been working closely with the Rural Crime Taskforce to look into hare coursing and motor policing.
- In the past 11 months, the Rural Crime Taskforce had recovered stolen property assets which totalled at over £800,000.
- There were 4 ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) vehicles attached to the Taskforce, and they had received funding to acquire 4 additional ANPR vehicles.
- There had been a decline in reported hare coursing incidents: in 2021, there had been 300 incidents, while there had been 100 incidents so far in 2022.
- 20 ANPR cameras had been purchased, dedicated to rural crime.

Nick Philp stated that he was impressed with the organisation and responses of the Rural Crime Taskforce.

Councillor Hunt asked about TVP's Facebook posts on rural crime, stating she had not seen them. Daniel Bennett replied that TVP posted mostly on Twitter, but also had a Facebook page. He added that TV alerts – a local social media output – were used. The Chairman informed Councillor Hunt that the Facebook page was the Rural Crimes TVP Facebook page.

Vice-Chairman William Emmett highlighted that his daughter videoed an incident of people riding on 4 unregistered quadbikes with children on the back at Hawthorne Hill on 16th August 2022. While he called 999 to report on the incident, William Emmett stated the police did not follow-up on this, adding that farmers needed more follow-up of crime incidents. Daniel Bennet responded that he had no personal knowledge of the specific incident but offered to ask about it and then follow-up on it.

Nick Philp presented an update from the farming community. He first explained how the War in Ukraine was affecting farmers. This included:

- A disruption of technological products for farming equipment, many which came from Ukraine.
- Reduction of agricultural exports from Ukraine affecting the world market, including an increase in grain prices in February 2022 and then dropping slightly in mid-2022 (caused by the opening of the grain corridor).
- The increase in fertiliser prices from £300 per tonne to £900 per tonne, which was a cause for concern as grain prices had recently decreased while fertiliser prices remained high and thus would make the growing of crops unsustainable.

Nick Philp then explained that political and economic instability in UK was another issue for farmers, where there had been 3 Prime Ministers and 3 Secretaries for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) from September to October 2022. He critically stated that former Prime Minister Liz Truss's trade deal with Australia had "gifted" it with tariff-free exports. The change in DEFRA secretaries had led to changes in national agricultural policy.

Regarding the status of farms, Nick Philp reported that the Basic Payment Scheme was coming to an end in 2027. By the end of 2022, farmers' income had reduced to 50% comparison to what they received in 2018. In 2022, DEFRA had introduced the Sustainable Farm Incentive 2022 to support farmers, including introductory level of payment for £20 per hectare. Two additional schemes – Flagship Landship Recovery Scheme and Local Nature Recovery Scheme – appeared to be abandoned, while the existing Countryside Stewardship Scheme would continue.

Nick Philp then discussed the heatwave in 2022. High temperatures were a major issue for farms as there was an increase in the risk of fires which endangered life, property and

infrastructure. High temperatures also had the potential to create long-term damage to flora and fauna.

On climate change, Nick Philp explained that farmers had to be more resilient to drought and flooding, such as storing crops to keep them safe from field fires as well as storing water in preparation for a drought. He wondered whether RBWM was prepared for droughts and flooding.

Nick Philp then highlighted H5N1 bird flu epidemic which farmers needed to mitigate against. He conveyed that RBWM had concerningly reported 122 cases since October 2022 (compared to 255 cases since October 2021). He explained that H5N1 was deadly and highly infectious amongst turkeys and hens whereby if one bird was infected, then around 50 more birds would die from it. Nick Philp also highlighted that this bird flu could spread and have an effect on the wild bird population; thus, bio-security measures were required.

Nick Philp concluded his presentation by highlighting farmers commemorating the recent passing of Queen Elizabeth II.

The Forum noted the update.

Progress Update on the Open Space Strategy Refresh

Jason Mills explained developments which occurred in Battlemead and Thriftwood. Both sites, he explained, were acquired by the Borough within the last 10 years, were 100 acres in size and had a mix of habitats (e.g., woodland, grasslands, streams, wetlands etc.).

Jason Mills explained that as the newly acquired land was to be used for public open space and access, the land had to be brought up to a standard for public open space. With Ockwells, for example, approximately 38 acres of the land was already local nature reserve, with 86 acres being acquired from Thriftwood farm. This provided an opportunity to start afresh with the new piece of land to balance public access with protection of wildlife and the enhancement of biodiversity. The initial stage for assessing land was to conduct habitat assessments by professional ecologists to analyse the area. From this, a management plan for the land would be formulated. He also highlighted that some of these lands acquired and managed by RBWM were former farmland.

Jason Mills then explained that managing the sites, particularly maintaining the balance of public access and wildlife conservation, required ongoing assessments, such as bird surveys in Battlemead.

Jason Mills then stated that the management plans focused on the annually collected data which were then used to adapt the plans to maintain the balance for biodiversity protection and public access.

Jason Mills then explained that 2 interesting developments which occurred. One development was an opportunity to plant some new woodlands in Ockwells and Thriftwood, with some funding from Network Rail. As of November 2022, and over the last 3 years, 20,000 trees were planted with plans to plant another 4,000 trees on the Thriftwood site for 2022. The other development was the introduction of conservation grazing in Battlemead. After the Borough acquired the land in 2018, a management plan was developed whereby the grass would be grazed annually as this considered best for the biodiversity of the grassland. This was done through the use of cows and sheep.

The Forum noted the update.

HGV Traffic Impact

Vice-Chairman William Emmett raised the issue of some long-term permitted development works on land razing near the Drift Road causing continuous HGV (Heavy Goods Vehicle) traffic travelling through B-class roads to access the sites. He believed that this was caused by the thoroughfare restriction from Maidenhead to Bracknell and Ascot being the A330. Consequently, Vice-Chairman William Emmett explained, traffic, including lorries, would travel down the A308, then through either the Drift Road, the road through Oakey Green or the back of Holyport.

Vice-Chairman William Emmett also highlighted that the sites where the development was taking place were under the jurisdiction of the Environment Agency rather than the Borough and did not have limited timeframes. He suggested that the planning sites should be time limited, stating that 10 years open-ended access to the site had created significant problems. He added that he would like the Borough to look more carefully in where it supported permitted development which were not time limited as well as having an impact on local people and local roads.

Andrew Durrant explained that the Borough and Highways Authority would be unable to apply restrictions on roads and localities where vehicles required access to sites. However, if the Borough could demonstrate that there were more suitable routes to access the sites, then restrictions could be applied. In addition, the environmental impact of HGVs could be considered to then apply restrictions. Andrew Durrant also stated that the Borough was looking into moving traffic enforcement which would apply restrictions on moving traffic (including HGVs), but this mostly applied to bridges. Nevertheless, Andrew Durrant reiterated that there were potentially alternative routes and possibilities which could be pursued to relieve rural areas.

Andrew Durrant offered to forward Vice-Chairman William Emmett's points to the Highways Team to look into, and then provide a written update to the Rural Forum.

Councillor Johnson stated that HGV traffic flow was a pertinent issue. He added that it would be illogical to pursue the enforcement of weight limits without a comprehensive review of the Borough's current system of weight restricted roads and access as they directed HGV traffic to unsuitable rural roads. He believed in the longer term there had to be alternative solutions to address the issue and get HGV movements back onto arterial roads rather than B- and C-class roads.

Councillor Coppinger agreed with Councillor Johnson, stating that his ward in Holyport (as well as Councillor Johnson's ward) were affected by heavy HGV traffic. He also agreed that a different solution was required with possibly a bypass in Holyport.

Nick Philp highlighted that some farms were reliant on HGV traffic to transport produce to and from their farms, stating that it was an issue that would not go away.

Vice-Chairman William Emmett stated that he was not seeking to restrict access to farmland for fellow farmers like Nick Philp. He said that he believed that the Borough would need to find road access off the M4 as there was development works in the local area.

The Forum noted the update.

Dates Of Future Meetings

The Forum noted that the next meeting was to be held on 7th March 2023.

The meeting, which began at 5.32 pm, finished at 7.03 pm

Chair.....

Date.....