

## RURAL FORUM

TUESDAY, 31 MAY 2022

PRESENT: Councillors Samantha Rayner (Chairman), Gerry Clark and Maureen Hunt

Also in attendance: Councillor Donna Stimson, Councillor Mandy Brar, Councillor John Baldwin, William Emmett (Vice-Chairman), Nick Philp, Michael Craig, William Westacott, Sam Eagling Fernandez, Steve Whitby, Nick Manderfield, Philip Mortimer, Alan Keene, Annie Keene, James Copas, Geoffrey Copas, Barnaby Briggs, Ben Gibbons and Tom Copas.

Officers: David Scott, James Thorpe, Jason Mills and Laurence Ellis

### ELECTION OF A NEW CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN

Alan Keene proposed Councillor Rayner. This was seconded by Geoffrey Copas.

After the election of Councillor Rayner as Chairman, Geoffrey Copas proposed William Emmett as Vice-Chairman. This was seconded by Councillor Hunt. Geoffrey Copas also expressed preference for there to be a Chairman and Vice-Chairman rather than two co-Chairmen. The Forum agreed.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED: That Councillor Rayner be appointed Chairman and William Emmett be appointed Vice-Chairman for the Rural Forum.**

### CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

### APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Councillor David Cannon, Councillor David Coppinger, Andrew Randall, Mark Hemmings and Colin Rayner.

### DECLARATION OF INTEREST

No declarations of interests.

### MINUTES

Nick Philp and William Westacott stated that their surnames were spelt incorrectly. The clerk confirmed to correct these.

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

### BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

Before the item was introduced, David Scott, Head of Communities, announced the Annual Rural Tour which was scheduled on 28<sup>th</sup> June and was to be hosted by the Copas family. He explained an outline of the event and sought to ensure there was a high attendance.

The Vice-Chairman William Emmett asked the Chairman if 'any other business' could be added on discussing the Council's policy on verge and danger signs being obliterated and overgrown in rural areas of the Borough. The Chairman agreed.

*(Tom Copas entered the meeting)*

The Chairman introduced the item by explaining the background to the paper: the new proposed Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) was supposed to go onto the Cabinet agenda in April but was withdrawn to gain more consultation. As the farming community was the main consultees, an extraordinary meeting of the Rural Forum was organised. She handed over to James Thorpe, Sustainability and Climate Change Lead.

James Thorpe gave a presentation which outlined the new Biodiversity Action Plan and the next steps. He started off with the background whereby the new BAP where work on it began when the Council declared a climate and environment emergency in 2019. The BAP included 6 different habitat action plans (HAPs): woodland, grassland, farmland, waterways, standing water and urban. There was a target of ensuring 30% of land in RBWM would be a space for nature by 2030 in line with the Council's Corporate Plan goal.

After the presentation, Councillor Stimson expressed apologies on how the BAP was communicated and the lack of engagement with the farming community. She stated that it should have been clear that the formulation of the BAP was about an engagement process and data collection and not "stamping on [farmer's] turf."

The Vice-Chairman William Emmett commented that it was an understatement that the farming community was surprised that the new BAP was placed on the agenda at the Cabinet meeting in April. He stated his biggest disappointment was why no Councillor had put this on a Rural Forum agenda to be discussed months prior.

Councillor Hunt gave some criticisms of the draft Biodiversity Action Plan. She argued it placed huge burden and responsibility on the agricultural community. She pointed out that other biodiversity action plans from other local authorities did not place the burden on farmers. Her examples included habitat decline being caused by agricultural intensification, development and pollution, and sub-habitats placing an onus on farmers. She also commented that it was confusing that the increase in public access to the woodland habitat threatened it, despite there being some cases of environmentally friendly public footpaths as well as the advocacy to increase public access to rural areas.

Jason Mills, Natural Environment Manager, replied that RBWM always sought to encourage access with its parks, open spaces and natural areas, stating that one of responsibilities was to improve this access. He gave a recent example of installing natural trail through an ancient woodland.

Councillor Hunt questioned about fauna being trampled on, while paths were widened. Jason Mills replied that the path naturally widened. Councillor Stimson elaborated that because the footpath had widened so much, it demarcated where the footpath was and therefore saved the flora.

Geoffrey Copas commented that the main consultation regarding the draft BAP appeared to be mainly from the urban population over the farmers' union and landowners. He proposed that sections of the draft BAP which related to the urban areas should pass in the next Cabinet meeting. He suggested that following from this, there should consultation with the rural community and then formulate a biodiversity action plan which affected rural areas.

James Thorpe reassured that the draft BAP was not intended to solve the biodiversity crisis, rather it was to begin conversations on ways to resolve it. In terms of engagement, James Thorpe mentioned that Councillor Stimson had intensive consultations over the last few weeks. He stated consultation events regarding the draft BAP had been widely publicised in

which anyone could attend and argued that it was a mistake to assume that it was only the urban environment.

Councillor Baldwin asked James Thorpe for an explanation on urban habitat action plans and what residents could do to help with biodiversity. James Thorpe answered that the habitat action plan included a list what residents could do, such as decreasing the use of lights in homes. Other examples conveyed included a lending library, where residents could borrow bat detectors or an infrared camera for one or two nights; and establishing a sustainable garden where residents could attend workshops and learn to embed sustainability and biodiversity into their gardens.

Nick Philp explained that his farm became part of a biodiversity trial whereby 2 ecologists came every week for 5 years to do trials, and that they did not have the data “fully up to speed”. Based on this, he stated that where there appeared to be some difficulties with data collection and followed by asking the reliability of the data which had been collected. Jason Mills accepted that data collection was a huge issue and challenge to gather all the necessary information. He explained that ecology surveys done on a regular basis (between two to five years), followed by a general habitat or condition assessment.

Councillor Clarke reassured the farmers that he understood the pressures and complications the farmers faced when facing changes. He expressed interest in developing the draft BAP later which included dialogue with rural forum members on an “appropriately regular basis”.

James Copas discussed the Countryside Stewardship and the ELM (Environmental Land Management) Schemes. He explained that, despite attempts to build up the ELM Schemes, progress had been slow. He added that there were questions on whether the schemes were financially viable. He then raised the issue of organic matter being externally exported from the Borough rather than being put back into local farming and requested the Council to look into this.

Geoffrey Copas cautioned about mixing up talk about climate change and biodiversity, and that the latter needed to be concentrated on. Citing the draft BAP, he stated that there seemed to be a desire for 30% of Borough to be available for biodiversity. He followed that the draft BAP stated that 33% of the Borough was woodland and therefore, he argued, biodiversity had been achieved. He then pointed out that a slide in the presentation stated that 23.5% of the land was identified as space for nature but it did not include woodland.

Based on this, Geoffrey Copas stated he could not support the current draft BAP and hope the Cabinet would not pass it. Though he added he did not mind sections of the BAP affecting the urban areas being passed.

Barnaby Briggs stated that the climate change baselines and some elements of biodiversity relating to the climate partnership idea needed to be commonly understood and worked on. Therefore, in the climate partnership, a short-term priority was to work on baselines to encourage some participation in terms of climate change and to certain extent biodiversity.

Referring to Nick Philp’s comment on the struggle to collect ecological data on his farm, Barnaby Briggs stated the climate partnership would be keen to help out. Barnaby Briggs added that another element of the climate partnership’s agenda would be working on the circular economy piece, relating to food waste and green waste. He suggested that he could discuss what the climate partnership did and what it could do next in a future Rural Forum meeting.

*(Councillor Johnson entered the meeting as a guest)*

Alan Keene asked about the numbers in the draft BAP, stating he was confused by them. He asked about the balance of rural to urban area in the Borough. He stated it was generally heard that 80-82% of the Borough was countryside. As 26% of the Borough was farmland

according to the draft BAP, Alan Keene was intrigued by what the remaining 56% of the Borough was. James Thorpe clarified that 26% of the countryside was cultivated farmland; meanwhile 29% was grassland and 33% was woodland.

William Westacott questioned and commented about statistics being scattered throughout the draft BAP and was not consolidated into a table or pie chart.

While acknowledging this was complicated, Alan Keene commented that there seemed to be too much emphasis on agriculture and farming in the report compared to other land which was not countryside or greenbelt.

Geoffrey Copas criticised the statistics in the report. He pointed out that farmers did not only cultivate land but had permanent pasture; and that this was not mentioned in the report. He asserted that there needed to be correct information. He then criticised how 23% of land used for biodiversity excluded woodland areas despite the target of 30% of land used for biodiversity. He reiterated that if the Cabinet were to pass the draft BAP, they should pass the sections relating to the urban areas and then handle the rural areas.

James Thorpe stated he would take on Geoffrey Copas's comments and recognised that the data needed to improve. He explained that the purpose of the biodiversity action plan was to improve the data and to ignite those conversations. He elaborated that based on these conversations, a new biodiversity action in the next three years may have improved data. James Thorpe then added he would review the figures.

Councillor Stimson believed that the draft BAP should not be withdrawn on the grounds the figures were scattered. She explained the document was created and overseen by BBOWT (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust). She followed that the document was sponsored and approved by the Crown Estate.

The Vice-Chairman William Emmett argued the Borough needed to understand the amount of work farmers regularly go through on the land they owned rather than acquiring approval from the Crown Estate, which was in a privileged position compared to other farmers.

Alan Keene then explained the Duke of Edinburgh Conservation Award, which took place annually at the Royal East Berkshire Agricultural Association and it was always popularly contested. He then followed that during the 2022 DoE Award, the judge was an officer of the Borough. Therefore, he argued, this should provide a conduit to reflect what farmers were doing in terms of conservation.

Ben Gibbons cautioned about the draft BAP being passed by Cabinet without any amendments due to the criticisms surrounding the figures. He elaborated that it would be hard to move forward without the farmers' consultation.

Councillor Hunt expressed concern of the objectives of the draft BAP for landowners, namely the target of encouraging 50 landowners in the Borough to create woodland and plant trees and hedgerows on their land, as well as provide guidelines to other landowners. She asserted that it was already established that the Borough's landowners were already excellent in managing their own land and promoting biodiversity. Therefore, she argued that these objectives should come about voluntarily from the landowners rather than being pursued and enforced by the Borough. Councillor Hunt then suggested that the draft BAP needed modifications. Based on this, she suggested that the Rural Forum should advise that the Cabinet defer the draft BAP to allow further consultations.

Councillor Hunt then proposed that the Cabinet defer passing the draft BAP. Geoffrey Copas seconded the proposal.

Councillor Clarke suggested a document should be circulated to all members of the Forum which outlined the data and its sources so that members could make comments about which data was acceptable and what needed to be reviewed.

**ACTION: James Thorpe to circulate data from the draft BAP to the Rural Forum.**

The Rural Forum unanimously forwarded a recommendation that the Cabinet defer passing the proposed Biodiversity Action Plan in its current form.

**RECOMMENDATION: Cabinet to defer passing the proposed Biodiversity Action Plan in its current form.**

The Vice-Chairman William Emmett raised another business to discuss. He said he would like to know the current Council policy on cutting road verges and highways where weeds were obscuring road safety signs. He stated he reported to the Parish Council two-and-a-half weeks prior to the meeting to inform them of the overgrowth of hog weed on the A330. Because of this, he criticised the Borough and Parish Councils lack of response. The Vice-Chairman William Emmett then asked what the Borough's policy was on highway maintenance and road safety. David Scott replied that he would relay this to colleagues.

DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Forum members noted that the next meeting would be held on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2022 in the Council Chamber, Town Hall, Maidenhead at 4:30pm. The forum members supported the use of hybrid meetings.

The meeting, which began at 5.32 pm, finished at 7.09 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....