

RURAL FORUM

TUESDAY, 30 NOVEMBER 2021

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

Also in attendance: Councillor Donna Stimson, William Emmett (Co-Chair), Alan Keene, Charlotte Elliot, Liz Hadden, Mark Hemmings, Tim Parry, Jeffery Copas, Nick Philp, Sergeant Andy Ward, Peter Murkin.

Officers: David Scott and Oran Norris-Browne

CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson welcomed all to the meeting and asked those present to introduce themselves.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Mary Fallon and James Copas.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made.

MINUTES

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 18th March 2021 were a true and accurate record.

RURAL CRIME UPDATE

Sergeant Andy Ward (Thames Valley Police) said that a rural crime plan existed and that it was based upon the 4 P's. These were pursue, prepare, prevent, and protect, with the main objectives being to increase confidence by building links with the rural community, reduce crime levels and work collectively with relevant parties for sustainable improvement. He added that rural crime would fall towards neighbourhood policing.

Sergeant Andy Ward added that they were keen to review any rural related incidents locally and that they would follow these up with a visit from the local team. He said that there was also a WhatsApp group chat that had been developed, with around 40 members of the public a part of it. Thames Valley Police announced through this group chat, that they would be around in the local community on Friday 26th November. No arrests were made; however, 1 individual was identified as having committed traffic offences.

Sergeant Andy Ward said that the rural operation was currently focussed mainly on wildlife crime, stolen vehicles, and plants. He added that it was a flexible operation and that it was developing. He said that the rural crime taskforce was a designated team that was focussed specifically on rural crime. He added that by January 2022, 10 officers from all over Thames Valley Police would be allocated to this taskforce, and that it would be intelligence led. He discussed the most recent incident involving the theft of horseboxes. This led to plants being recovered and returned to owners.

Sergeant Andy Ward said that the taskforce had an inspector who was Stuart Hutchins and 2 sergeants, with a collection of detectives and PC's. Within the borough there had been 30 incidents in the last 6 months that were flagged as rural crime. This had increased from 18 at the same point in 2020. There had been 1209 incidents of domestics.

Councillor Hunt asked if out of the 40 WhatsApp members, how many were farmers and where did the Independent Advisory Group mentioned by Inspector Mike Darrah come into play. Sergeant Andy Ward confirmed that these were 2 separate things.

Councillor Hunt asked if information came through to the police from farmers via the WhatsApp group. Sergeant Andy Ward said it could be but admitted that it had its natural limitations and encouraged people to still phone the police directly to report crime.

Alan Keene elaborated further about the WhatsApp group chat which had launched in May 2021. He said that there was now a good police presence on this group and that there were also no geographical boundaries to the group chat. Tim Parry to discuss the group chat further with Alan Keene offline.

Councillor Rayner asked if the number of incidents that had been reported was a true reflection and that if perhaps not all incidents were being reported and placed on record her appreciation for the training day that was held.

Sergeant Andy Ward said that they suspected like most crimes that they were underreported, which could explain the low numbers mentioned previously. He also stated that a reason for the increase compared to last year could be due to the way in which crimes were now reported, such as at first contact.

The Co-Chair William Emmett said that there had been numerous incidents throughout the summer affecting farmers. One most notable incident involved quadbikes on land in Holyport and the Drift road. He also expressed his concerns at police response times to the locations of incidents when reporting over the phone.

Nick Philp said that incidents such as minor trespasses had generally not been reported. He asked if it was possible for communication between the Police in different boundary areas to improve. Sergeant Andy Ward said that he would feed this back to his team and the control rooms offline.

Jeffrey Copas asked if there was available technology to pinpoint exact locations of incidents when phoning the Police. Sergeant Andy Ward said that there was an application called 'What 3 Words' that allowed for a person's exact location to be pinpointed using co-ordinates. Councillor Cannon supported Sergeant Andy Ward's comments on the What 3 Words application and he also stated that the fire control centre had the ability to pinpoint exact locations of persons calling in to report an incident. He stated that he would be surprised if this was also not the case with the police. Sergeant Andy Ward said that he would pass this on to the control room.

Alan Keene also supported the What 3 Words application and added that it could also be easily shared within the WhatsApp group chat.

The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson asked for clarity on the boundary's covered by Sergeant Andy Ward. He confirmed that the report he gave covered all the borough and that if a person was to be put through to the wrong police department for a different borough, then this would be easily re-routed and sorted.

UPDATE FROM THE FARMING COMMUNITY

Charlotte Elliott, Catchment Advisor for South East Water outlined some new changes that were occurring for farming. These included:

- Brexit.
- Supply chain issues.
- Carbon accounting.
- COVID-19.
- Future Trade Agreements.
- Input prices.
- Pesticide withdrawals/resistance.
- Introduction of Environmental Land Management (ELM).
- Availability of Labour.
- Phasing out of the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS).

Charlotte Elliott said that between 2021 and 2028, an agricultural transition was beginning to take place. She said that the BPS would be phased out over 7 years, starting in 2021. The last payments would be made in 2027 and the money released from this would stay within the sector, until the end of the current Parliament and be used to help farmers negotiate the changes, improve efficiency, adopt new technologies and to take actions to address climate change.

Charlotte Elliott said that on 16th November 2021, the Farm Investment Fund was launched, which provided funding for farming equipment. It was divided into two strands: The Farming Equipment & Technology Fund, with grants existing from between £2,000 to £25,000 and the Farming Transformation Fund with grants from £35,000 to £500,000.

Charlotte Elliott added that the Environmental Land Management scheme was the new Agri-environment scheme, which would be up and running by 2024. It will support the aims of the government's 25-year Environment Plan, namely:

- Clean air.
- Clean and plentiful water.
- Thriving plants and wildlife.
- Reduction in and protection from environmental hazards.
- Mitigation and adaptation to climate change.
- Enhanced beauty, heritage, and engagement with the environment.

Charlotte Elliott said that the Environmental Land Management had 3 components and that it would replace the currently existing Agri-environment schemes such as the Countryside Stewardship. However, these would be open to new applications until 2023. The 3 components of the new scheme were the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) starting in 2022, the Local Nature Recovery and the Landscape Recovery component. She added that the SFI currently had a pilot scheme running with over 1,000 farmers being part of it, including one from the borough.

Charlotte Elliott said that the SFI would be offered to applicants in 2022 on 3-year agreements and that it would develop over time. She added that it would initially be open only to BPS recipients, but ultimately would be offered to a wide range of land managers. Payments would be made quarterly and that more details would be published during the week after the forum meeting.

Charlotte Elliott said that the SFI had a series of 'standards' and each standard had different levels of ambition (actions to undertake) – introductory, intermediate and advanced.

One example, the 'Arable and Horticultural Soils Standard' was unlikely to change before the application window opened in 2022. Actions that were required included the following:

- **Introductory** – assess soil; alleviate compaction; establish green cover; add organic matter

- **Intermediate** – establish green cover; add organic matter; use min-till or no-till cultivation techniques
- **Advanced** – establish green cover; add organic matter; create a soil management plan

With regards to local perspective and opportunities, Charlotte Elliott noted the following to the forum members:

- One farm in the borough was part of the Sustainable Farming Incentive pilot and was thereby helping to design the new scheme.
- There was a close-knit farming community in the borough capable of working together.
- There was a desire to understand and work with farmers – The Farming Forum was evidence of that.
- There was ongoing support through the transition - including from the South East Water/CSF partnership.
- The largest agricultural holding in the Borough was already in Countryside Stewardship.
- Other farms which had not applied for Countryside Stewardship before, applied in 2021.
- Many farmers were already in the process of changing their practices to become more sustainable.
- The Borough had plenty of opportunities for local nature recovery.
- There were enthusiastic local community groups, that were well engaged with local farmers.
- There was plenty of potential for educational access.

Councillor Stimson asked for the presentation used by Charlotte to be distributed to all forum members after the meeting. The clerk confirmed this.

Jefferey Copas said that Reading University monitored 400 farmer's accounts in England. He said that if the government support was taken away then only very few farmers would be able to make a living. He expressed concern over the long-term continuation of farming and the greenbelt countryside within the borough. He asked for Councillors to provide the costings for Battlemead Common.

Alan Keene expressed his disappointment at local access having not been discussed so far in any visible plans. He said that the borough needed to look at enhancing and maintaining the local access network by incentivising farmers. Charlotte Elliott confirmed that 'access to the countryside or 'engagement with the environment' was amongst the aims of the 25 year Environment Plan.

Councillor Rayner admitted that it was very important as a borough for a focus to be on how things are going to move forward, especially with reference to things such as the greenbelt land and being carbon neutral.

Jeffrey Copas expressed his concerns over the Council's definitive views over the agricultural community and the greenbelt land in general. Councillor Rayner replied by stating that she believed that the agricultural community was vital to the local economy and added to the vibrancy of the borough. She noted that it was a massive part of the borough's food, distribution, identity, economy, housing, and employment.

The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson asked Charlotte Elliott about trees. Charlotte Elliott said that there was a strategy for this, however she was unable to elaborate on this and referred the

forum members to the government website:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-trees-action-plan-2021-to-2024>

Jeffrey Copas asked for Councillor Rayner's response prior to be accurately recorded within the minutes. The clerk acknowledged this. He then stated that farmers control around 70% of the borough area, and that in terms of Councillors, this was under-represented.

Jeffrey Copas said that when asking the Council to come to farms to view trees, the response from officers was nil. He asked for tree officers to communicate greatly and work with farmers, and not against them. The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson said that they would attempt to liaise with the tree officers, to see what more could be done.

Nick Philp said that trees were not always the best way forward. He said that trees were not a net carbon import until they were around 40 years old. He added that neighbouring boroughs had also become a lot like London and that it was important to maintain a balance within this borough.

The Co-Chair William Emmett said that there was an existing issue with water being generated by the Syngenta site. He said that all of this excess water would come through Holyport into Bray. Councillor Coppinger stated that he was aware of this issue and that it was in nobody's interest for it to occur.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Co-Chair Councillor Bateson asked the forum members if they had any ideas or requests for items to be discussed at future meetings, as this was the main aim of the forum.

Nick Philp said that he had asked for a member of the planning department to attend the meeting to address some issues that existed amongst the farmers. Jeffrey Copas supported this request for a planning officer to attend the next meeting and stated that he desired some explanations as to why the planning process was taking so long. He added that it was important to improve access to the countryside, which fell under the planning department. Jeffrey Copas said that it was important to plan for example 50 years ahead.

Councillor Clark apologised that he had to leave the forum meeting to attend another meeting, however thanked farmers for their time and added that he wanted to know the real problems that they faced, so that they could be addressed.

(Councillor Clark and Councillor Cannon left the meeting)

Councillor Coppinger stated that he was not aware of the request for a planning officer to attend the meeting but reminded members that no live applications would be discussed. He added that if they still desired an officer to attend the next meeting, then he would ensure that one attended.

Alan Keene asked if there was a policy on the 70% of farmers land and what the borough wished to do with it. He added that if there was no existing policy then could this be looked at before the next meeting. He asked if Councillors were thinking expansively about planning and moving forward.

Councillor Hunt asked if the farmers could get together and forward their requests for meeting topics to the Co-Chair William Emmett. She also added that she had discussed with the Leader of the Council about adding a condition to planning applications. If the application was approved, then the condition would have to come into force.

(Tim Parry left the meeting)

Jeffrey Copas expressed concern over future generations struggling and giving up due to the threat of pressure groups and that he wanted to know what Councillors wanted to know from the forum members, rather than the other way around.

The Co-Chair William Emmett said that he would like to know what the borough's population was 40 years ago. He said this could then suggest how many people come to the borough to enjoy the rural side of it. Jeffrey Copas agreed with this. He said that a survey showed 98% of residents wanted to preserve the borough's greenbelt. He added that only 5% of residents had completed this though.

David Scott, Head of Communities said that he would take the points raised offline and liaise with Andrew Durrant, Executive Director of Place and said that he would most likely be happy to join the next meeting to address some points raised by the forum members.

Jeffrey Copas said that it would be useful in the summer months for Councillors to attend a farm in person to get a feel for what the current situations were that faced farmers.

DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Forum members noted that the next meeting would be held on 23rd March 2022, at the Grey rooms, York House, Windsor at 5:30pm. The forum members supported the use of hybrid meetings.

Alan Keene expressed concern over the acoustics in the Council Chamber when it came to in-person meetings. The clerk acknowledged this and stated that meetings were being moved to York House as the audio quality was greatly improved here. Members agreed with this statement.

The Co-Chairmen thanked everybody for their attendance.

The meeting, which began at 5.30 pm, finished at 7.15 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....