

RURAL FORUM

Tuesday 7 March 2023

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

Also in attendance: William Emmett (Vice-Chairman), Nick Philp, Nick Manderfield, Geoffrey Copas, James Copas, Michael Gray, Alan Keene, Annie Keene, Liz Hadden, PC Matt Gleave TVP, Ed Hurley, Matt Sale, Councillor Donna Stimson and Andre Tranquilini.

Also in attendance, virtually: Barnaby Briggs, Andrew Randall, Paul Rinder, Jessica Berry, and Councillor Gurpreet Bhangra

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

Chairman's Introduction

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

Apologies For Absence

Apologies were received from Parish Councillor Barbara Story as well as Colin Rayner from the National Farmers Union (NFU), but he mentioned that Nick Manderfield would be able to speak on behalf of the NFU as vice-chair.

Nick Day was invited to represent the Crown Estate but was unable to attend.

Declaration Of Interest

No declarations of interest received.

Minutes

Geoffrey Copas suggested an action list in the minutes which could then be reviewed in the next meeting to ensure the actions were being met. He also suggested a 'matters arising' and 'any other business' added to the agenda. He also suggested that reports be circulated before the meeting which would then be highlighted during the meeting. Councillor Hunt supported the proposals.

Laurence Ellis, Democratic Services Officer, stated that he would look into this.

ACTION: The clerk to look into altering the agenda.

AGREED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2022 were a true and accurate record.

Biodiversity Action Plan

Jason Mills, Natural Environment Manager, explained that BAP had been approved by Council, though the farming HAPs (Habitat Action Plans) had not been adopted yet. He acknowledged that work and consultation with the farming community was required to further develop the final Farmland HAP. He believed the best way forward was to enact some

consultation amongst farmers and suggested that he and other Natural Environment Officers visit the farms to gain an understanding of farming practices. From there, start a conversation on the best practice and methods, which would then be incorporated into the Farmland HAP. He believed that there had been some good practices amongst farms, based on his visits, but these were not being highlighted amongst residents and captured in the BAP.

Jason Mills then stated that he would present a Farmland HAP in six months which could then be reviewed and then be agreed.

Vice-Chair William Emmett commented that Nick Manderfield had organised an environmental competition recently, in which Councillors were invited to, and that Jason Mills should have gathered a substantial amount of information on farming projects to start formulating the Farmland HAP and questioned why he needed to visit the farms again. Jason Mills replied that the event was part of an environmental awards and, while visiting many farms during the day, it was more of a whistle-stop tour with only brief visits. While mindful of interfering with farmers' busy schedules, Jason Mills wanted to gain a better idea of the day-to-day activities and what farms were doing to benefit the environment.

Vice-Chair William Emmett responded that farmers had signed up to a 5-year environmental improvement agreement, which had already produced positive benefits, and that farms took part in the National Farmland Bird Count. Therefore, he stated, there was already a lot of work to be seen.

Councillor Stimson suggested to invite Paul Sedgwick from the Crown Estate to Forum meetings as he handled rural affairs.

ACTION: Invite Paul Sedgwick from the Crown Estate to the next Rural Forum meeting.

Geoffrey Copas suggested that Jason Mills could create a list of the amount of acreage which were part of the environmental schemes so that they could be presented to the general public. He reiterated his criticism of the BAP, namely its size, and that it needed to be better presented to farmers. He compared this to the Chiltern report, where the Chiltern Management Board produced a document on what farmers were doing for biodiversity.

Reflecting on the comments received, Andrew Durrant, Executive Director of Place Services, suggested that the farm visits should have suggestive draft action areas beforehand so that the visits were planned and productive rather than going in with a blank slate. From this, he suggested, the farm visits would be about consolidating, refining and solidifying those actions further as well as pick up on any gaps.

ACTION: Officers to formulate draft actions in preparation for farm visits.

(Councillor Bhangra entered the meeting virtually at 17:50; Councillor Johnson entered the meeting at 17:52)

Nick Philp suggested that he and other farmers could forward farming data, such as hectares for wild bird cover or wildflower margins that were part of the scheme or what farmers were doing voluntarily. He also suggested that he and Vice-Chair William Emmett could collate this data. Jason Mills agreed to the suggestion. He commented that this was about how to collate that data, analyse it, and then present it in a clear and understood manner.

ACTION: Vice-Chair William Emmett and Nick Philp to collate farming data and forward this to Jason Mills.

Geoffrey Copas requested an action whereby he would acquire a copy of the Chilterns document, which detailed what farmers were doing for biodiversity, and then every Forum member should receive a copy of this. He then suggested that RBWM should produce a

similar report in one or two years to convey to the public on what farmers were doing for biodiversity.

ACTION: Geoffrey Copas to acquire a copy of the biodiversity document from the Chiltern Management Board, which would then be circulated to Rural Forum members.

Vice-Chair William Emmett asked what the target date to complete the Farmland HAP was. Jason Mills answered that he planned to present a draft in the next Forum meeting in November 2023.

ACTION: Jason Mills to present the draft Farmland HAP during the next Rural Forum meeting.

Paul Rinder suggested a questionnaire to be created for the farming membership on the Rural Forum which would convey how many members were part of the environment schemes and what kind of schemes they had on their farms. He added that this would create a starting point of knowledge.

ACTION: Officers to create a questionnaire where farmers can note whether they were part of any environment schemes or had any schemes on their farms.

Climate Partnership Update

Barnaby Briggs, Executive Chair of Climate Partnership, gave a presentation. He briefly informed the Forum that the Climate Partnership was an initiative, established by RBWM to promote action on sustainability.

Barnaby Briggs started off by giving an overview of the actions in which the Climate Partnership had done so far:

- Established the Climate Partnership Community Investment Company (CIC), with an independent Board, Vision and Mission.
- Engaged with more than 50 stakeholders, from large corporates to community groups, to establish what would be the best actions to enact.

Three projects were initiated, including projects on:

- A big solar scheme at Furze Platt school which sought to expand the school's solar power. He added that this would have an element of community ownership later in March 2023, where residents would be able to buy shares in this project.
- A domestic energy efficiency with local partners to improve energy efficiency in households. This would also involve some community ownership which would be revealed during the summer of 2023.
- Wellbeing and biodiversity with BBWOT (Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust) and other partners to promote connectivity with the natural environment.

These projects, Barnaby Briggs explained, were intended to catalyse change and to start setting the agenda.

Other actions included:

- Commissioned assessment needs of what was going on nationally, internationally and in the Borough, to create a create debates and conversations.
- Direct support amongst local community groups, including Cookham's Footprint and the ECO Action Hub.
- Arranging a Net Zero event with the Chamber of Commerce.
- Creating up a website (<https://www.theclimatepartnership.co.uk>).

Barnaby Briggs then showed a graph which provided the basis on understanding where the Climate Partnership and Borough could have the most impact. Based the graph, the Climate

Partnership focused on projects relating to, for example, home energy retrofit and affordable and efficient homes.

Barnaby Briggs then explained the next steps were to:

- Continue to deliver and grow the three projects.
- Set up a Strategic Advisory Panel, ideally composed of local big employers and special interest groups, to create community oversight.
- Organise a Launch Event in the summer.
- Increase the size of the Board.
- Expand communications, including a Website & Newsletter.
- Recruiting staff.

Councillor Hunt asked what school was subject to the solar scheme project and what other schools were in the pipeline. Barnaby Briggs answered that the school was Furze Platt Senior School. As for schools in the pipeline, he stated that he reached out to 10 schools (out of 66 schools in the Borough), but discussions had not progressed very far due to focus on installing the solar panel project in Furze Platt, which could then set an example.

Geoffrey Copas asked how many kilowatts the solar panels produced in Furze Platt. He also stated that there should be turbines in every weir along the river Thames. Barnaby Briggs replied that he did not have the exact figure of kilowatts the Furze Platt solar panels produced, though he could provide them separately. He added that he vaguely remembered the non-trivial energy savings were in the tens of thousands per year. He then stated that he agreed to installing the turbines along the river Thames.

Paul Rinder asked how the projects were to be funded and whether the Borough would have any grants schemes available for interested parties. Barnaby Briggs answered that the Climate Partnership was an independent community investment company. While the Borough was the primary funder, this was not the ideal model for the future and therefore the aim was to acquire other funders alongside the Borough. In terms of project funding, the Borough's funding was not enough to finance the projects. The community ownership model would raise money from community shareholders as well as potentially trigger other funding.

Barnaby Briggs then explained that in the short-term, the Climate Partnership money could act catalytically. For example, if funding was provided for the mental health project, a fundraising exercise could be unlocked.

Councillor Johnson asked about the progress on securing private funding, adding that the Climate Partnership was established to leverage funding from the private sector. Barnaby Briggs replied that acquiring funding had been tricky and that the best way to attract funding was to demonstrate what the Climate Partnership could deliver. While it was not happening quickly, it was nevertheless on the agenda.

Vice-Chair William Emmett stated that farmers were making their contributions to environmentalism, such as solar power and recycling. He then stated the Council should encourage, under the Planning Committee, houses to have solar panels on their roofs. Councillor Johnson responded that this was something the Borough was encouraging with major developments, though mentioned that the Borough was governed by national legislation as well.

Councillor Stimson made a couple of comments. On Vice-Chair William Emmett's comment, she stated the Borough was formulating sustainability supplementary planning document which would be tougher than the national regulations on homes with the aim of RBWM being one of the leading local authorities in terms of climate biodiversity and health and well-being.

Councillor Stimson then explained that a report was expected from an organisation with partnership with the Climate Partnership on the next steps as well as the best model approach in engaging with business.

Geoffrey Copas suggested for the next meeting that there should be details on the solar panels at the school, namely how much kilowatts was produced, the costs, how much was the school saving in electricity and the school's return investment. He suggested that the Council should put forward examples of funding to encourage individuals and organisations to take part in this.

Rural Crime Update

PC Matt Gleave from Thames Valley Police (TVP) gave a verbal update on rural crime.

From September to December 2022, 23 rural crimes were reported in RBWM, with one location experiencing three offences but had since then seen no incidents. The most common offence was lamping with five recorded in the period. Unfortunately, the offenders were not identified, and the offences were usually discovered and reported until the following day which would then hinder investigations.

There was also one offence of poaching and one residential burglary. The rest of rural crimes were single anomalies and not confirmed as rural crime.

PC Matt Gleave then explained that when a crime was reported, the Neighbourhood Team would offer a security survey and look to target hardened properties and farming machinery. He also then promoted the use of the rural crime WhatsApp group to which PCs had access to. He also mentioned the use of the Rural Crime Taskforce.

PC Matt Gleave then informed that TVP ran an operation on Nick Philp's farm in July 2022. This involved Nick Philp possessing a police radio to contact the police directly, and then had 6 to 7 PCs in patrol cars in Nick Philp's land and the wider area over the course of a couple of nights. PC Matt Gleave stated the operation was successful as it increased a police presence in an area where police were not strongly present on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights.

Another operation was conducted in November 2023 where hair coursing usually started. The only incident were 4 offenders around The Wreck in Datchet.

The Rural Crime Taskforce had been reasonably active in the Windsor and Maidenhead area, though acknowledged that there were no dedicated officers in the area. Compared to the last rural crime update, where £800,000 worth of stolen machinery and equipment were seized, this had increased to £1.2 million.

PC Matt Gleave then gave some statistics:

- 404 crime investigations were conducted with 123 positive outcomes.
- 1,600 stop checks
- 66,000 tickets were issued with 46 vehicles seized.
- 181 stop searches with 41 being positive.

In the last three months, there were 2 charges in relation to rural crime in the Windsor and Maidenhead area.

Finally, PC Matt Gleave stated that he was requested to gather feedback from the Forum for the upcoming Community Safety and Crime Summit on 17th March 2023, a summit involving representatives from across the Borough which sought to maintain and improve community safety across the Borough. He then asked if there were any key issues which the Forum would like to be raised at the Summit.

Vice-Chair William Emmett was critical of the rural crime update. He stated that there were pages of incidents posted in a WhatsApp group with many of them not being reported because farmers were losing faith in receiving an answer from the police through the 101-call

line. He added that his son-in-law had followed a car without number plates for 4 miles trying to contact the police but received no answer. He added that his farm experienced 6 incidents since Christmas 2022 with several of them reported. He concluded that it was appalling that there was one recorded crime of wildlife. PC Matt Gleave replied that the crime statistics covered from September to December 2022 and therefore did not cover the period after Christmas 2022.

Vice-Chair William Emmett responded that it had “become a fortress” for many farmers from the south of Holyport on Saturdays and Sundays; stating, for example, he had to purchase large concrete poacher blocks to protect his farm. He asserted that the rural community deserved better support than it was currently receiving.

PC Matt Gleave replied that he was aware that the 101-call line did take a while to get a response. Alongside an online webform, he also stated that emergency incidents (i.e., something at risk of damage, someone at risk of being hurt or was happening immediately) should be reported through 999.

Vice-Chair William Emmett stated that farmers needed more visible support from the police at night time. He added that the farming community had lost confidence in the police and that they needed to win back respect from farmers.

While acknowledging the work of the Rural Crime Taskforce, Councillor Cannon commented that they did not seem to be deployed in Berkshire. He stated that the Forum would like to see engagement with the local farmers so they could acquire their fair share of rural policing. PC Matt Gleave replied that he would relay back to TVP to see if regular patrols from Rural Crime Taskforce could be established in the Berkshire area.

After endorsing Councillor Cannon’s comments, Councillor Johnson agreed with Vice-Chair William Emmett’s feedback, stating that the Borough had provided funding to establish additional frontline police resource in the form of warranted officers.

Referring to the operation on his farm in July 2022, Nick Philp stated that he sought a follow-up operation but was unable to contact Colin who ran the operation.

Geoffrey Copas commented that there appeared to be patterns in rural crime activities, namely incidents taking place mostly on weekends, a lack of hare coursing in the Cookham area, the crime hotspot being the Drift Road and usually at around the end of harvest season. He suggested that the police should follow the pattern by placing some focus on the Drift Road.

Vice-Chair William Emmett agreed that there were hotspots, namely in Twyford and the west of Windsor Great Park.

Andrew Durrant stated that the next steps was to relay the feedback and concerns from the Rural Forum to the upcoming Community Safety and Crime Summit. He also suggested that the invite to the Summit could be extended to Forum members.

ACTION: Andrew Durrant to extend the invite to the Community Safety and Crime Summit to Rural Forum members.

ACTION: PC Matt Gleave to forward the feedback from the Rural Forum to the Community Safety and Crime Summit.

PC Matt Gleave reiterated that crime incidents should be reported either through 999 or the online form, alongside the WhatsApp groups, so that the police could be aware on what was going on. He added, for example, that incidents reported on an online form would allow police catalogue and then investigate them.

Update From The Farming Community

Ed Hurley from Copas Traditional Turkeys gave a general farming update, namely discussing two items on labour and avian influenza.

Regarding farm labour, Ed Hurley explained that the turkey business revolves around the last 4 weeks of the end of every year, and if this does not go well, an entire year of business was gone. He then conveyed that the business had experienced some challenges in labour due to the new regulations and issuing of visas. Originally, he explained, labourers were recruited directly across Europe every year; but the new visa system meant that two companies acquired a monopoly on the issuing of visas. This had increased labour costs by 30% through agency costs and further 10% on visa costs, accumulating to 40% increase in costs overall. This thus caused a change in thinking and operation.

With the current visa scheme coming by the end of 2023, Ed Hurley hoped that the new visa scheme would allow a smooth transfer of skilled labour. He explained that Copas Traditional Turkeys (and the wider turkey industry) were competing with Europe in attracting labourers and were struggling to attract and compensate these labourers properly as significant costs were going to labour providers.

Ed Hurley moved onto avian influenza. While avian influenza had been around for years and had been managed, it had become an endemic in 2023, creating challenges. He explained that it had significantly affected the turkey industry. In the last winter in 2022, 5 million birds were affected, with 2.8 million of these being turkeys, causing the rise in prices in turkeys during Christmas 2022. He added that the goose industry had been greatly affected as well.

While there was no serious outbreak in the local areas, Ed Hurley explained that restrictive and quarantine-like measures between farms were nevertheless implemented to mitigate the endemic. He also stated that bird feed companies were reducing their support to smaller businesses due to the business risk.

When asked by the Chair if there was anything to help match employees and employers, Andrew Durrant said it could be something that could be investigated offline. This, he suggested, may include connecting Ed Hurley to the economic growth team who identify employment opportunities for local people, whether from colleges and school or the adult employment market and therefore create employment pathways.

Ed Hurley replied that he had never been averse to hiring local people, but he added that he needed to hire labourers who were absolutely committed to job in spite of any hardships.

Councillor Cannon asked Ed Hurley on how he perceived the public's reaction or DEFRA's (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs) communication with the public on bird flu. Ed Hurley replied that public concern caused people either to quickly buy turkeys or panic in catching bird flu and thus hurting the industry further. He added that DEFRA needed to improve their support and response.

Geoffrey Copas stated that the Borough could not really do much to respond to the issue of avian influenza and that this was a national issue which should ideally be raised to Theresa May, MP for Maidenhead.

While acknowledging that the issue was on a national level, Councillor Johnson stated that the Borough could focus on increasing local productivity and utilising the local labour market as there were skill shortages and unemployment in the Borough. He also stated that there were tentative discussions with the national government on devolution in Berkshire and that those discussions could involve skills, training and investment.

Dates Of Future Meetings

The Chair informed that the next meeting would be on 14 November 2023 (5.30 pm). She added that an activity in the summer would possibly be arranged.

The meeting, which began at 5.32 pm, finished at 7.10 pm

Chair.....

Date.....