

GREENER SELECT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY, 30 MARCH 2010

Councillors: Peter Argyle (P), Howard Bairstow (P), Tim Metcalfe (P), Tony Vickers (Vice-Chairman) (P) and Emma Webster (Chairman) (P)

Also Present: Councillor Paul Bryant, Nic Lampkin, Executive Director Organic Research Centre (Elm Farm), Lawrence Woodward, Co-Director Organic Research Centre (Elm Farm), Tamara Sciopu, Executive Director Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxford Food Group, and Alexander Farrow Director Thames Valley Farmers Market., and David Cook (Principal Policy Officer WBC).

PART I

1 Apologies

Apologies for the inability to attend the meeting were received on behalf of Councillor Lee Dillon.

2 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2010 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Emma Webster declared an interest in Agenda Item 5, and reported that, as her interest was personal and prejudicial she would be leaving the meeting during the course of consideration of the matter.

4 Review of Local Resources - Local Food

The Committee considered evidence (Agenda Item 4) from Nic Lampkin, Executive Director Organic Research Centre (Elm Farm), Lawrence Woodward, Co-Director Organic Research Centre (Elm Farm), Tamara Sciopu, Executive Director Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxford Food Group, and Alexander Farrow Director Thames Valley Farmers Market. The evidence formed part of the Greener Select Committee's review of the use of local food.

Nic Lampkin and Lawrence Woodward gave a presentation on the views of the Organic Research Centre into the review being conducted by the Greener Select Committee. The committee were informed that the Organic Research Centre's, aim was to develop and support sustainable land-use, agriculture and food systems, primarily within local economies, which build on organic principles to ensure the health and well-being of soil, plants, animals, people and the environment.

The Organic Research Centre was established as a "Centre of Excellence" to address the major issues raised by a global economy based on an intensive agricultural system.

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It was the UK's leading research, development and advisory institution for organic agriculture, having played a pivotal role in the development of organic research, policy and standards since 1980.

Nic Lampkin informed Members that he supported the views raised by Kelvin Hughes, at the previous meeting of the Greener Select Committee, regarding the work of the Local Strategic Partnership's Greener Sub-Partnership. Members were informed that local production was important to assist local economic development by targeting spend on local communities, to help reduce energy used and greenhouse gas emitted by reducing food miles and improving food quality through improved freshness.

Members were informed that just because food was produced locally did not mean they met the aims previously mentioned. People need to question what quality standards were guaranteed, how energy or carbon efficient the production and transport of the food was, did buying from a local business ensure local production and was local trade necessarily fair and ethical? To make sure local production did make a real contribution to sustainability local food should meet environmental standards, meet food quality standards, meet animal welfare standards and be aware of social standards such as Fair Trade.

With regards to organic food Members were informed that organic farms aimed to improve the quality and sustainability of food production that operated to standards that addressed environmental and animal welfare issues. As the term 'organic food' was legally defined and regulated its standards should be more reliable than food labelled as local without any quality assurance. Members were also informed that organic food need not be significantly more expensive and the additional costs were usually associated with supermarkets artificially increasing the cost.

The sustainable benefit of organic food was recognised across Europe and by Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The benefits included reduced energy consumption, increased biodiversity, reduced pollution, high animal welfare standards, increased evidence of food quality benefits and positive social impacts such as increased employment. As organic food was legally defined there would be no legal procurement restrictions in organisations targeting organic food in their procurement process.

With regards to the recommendations for the Greener Select Committee and the work of the Local Strategic Partnership's Greener Sub-Partnership, there should be support for initiatives that encouraged more 'grow your own food', support for local food initiatives, school food education initiatives, promote food festivals, a West Berkshire local food standard or promoting local procurement.

Members were informed that the Organic Research Centre could help by providing advice on local food issues, advice on standards and regulations, support school education activities and be an active partner with the Local Strategic Partnership. The research centre had also recently opened its conference centre and was keen to work on joint initiatives with the Nature Discovery Centre.

Whilst discussing the presentation Members raised the following points:

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- Was it more expensive to produce organic food or was it an economy of scale? Members were informed that there were large organic farms for larger production yields; however any cost benefits could be removed with low yield production. There was high demand in the retail sector but this could not be met with low supply levels.
- The benefits to increased local employment: was this a contributory factor in the increased cost of organic food? Organic farms often employ more people but this was offset by the increased yields per worker. Some of the increased costs of organic food in supermarkets were often caused by high mark up margins imposed by the retailer.
- As certain drugs were banned in organic production did this increase the discomfort of live stock? Animal welfare was secured by the lower stress levels associated with organic farming methods and it was permitted to use some drugs to maintain animal health.
- Was there a moral dilemma with introducing organic production to help meet national requirements when internationally people were going without food? Promoting organic farming methods has helped promote local food production in third world countries that in turn has helped stimulate food security. Current agricultural methods were very dependent on fossil fuels and thus were not sustainable. It was not possible to feed the world on a western diet, for sustainable production we had to look at production, distribution and diet.
- Was there a role for genetically modified food? Genetically modified food might have a role in the future but not in the short or medium term. Part of Elm Farm's role was to look at changes in technology with regards to food production.

Tamara Schiopu attended the meeting to inform Members of the work of the Local Food Group and to answer any questions pertinent to the review. Members were informed that the term 'local' could be very wide or narrow in its definition. As the Local Food Group covered three counties they classed local food as food produced in these counties, they did not wish to introduce barriers to collective working.

Members were informed that there used to be three separate food groups, in 2004 they were merged with the aid of funding from the South East England Development Agency. This funding ceased on 31 March 2010 and the group were looking for additional support. Since the group were created they had become a support network for local producers and worked at introducing local suppliers to local businesses. 'Meet the buyer' events were held and they also published Local Flavours that promoted locally produced food and drink. If funding could be found they would like to introduce local food walks and a food and drink trade show in West Berkshire. In response to questions Members were informed that local food hubs could be introduced so buyers had a central point of contact that introduced them to a wide variety of producers within the local area.

Alexander Farrow informed Members that the Thames Valley Market Co-operative was a 'not-for-profit' organisation that promoted fresh, seasonal, local food. Most

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produce for the Newbury Farmers Market were within 30 miles however they had to be flexible, for example the fish came from Southsea. The idea was to be more local rather than totally local. Farmers markets could be useful as local food hubs and local restaurants have been asked to cook at local markets. As markets were not always weekly it was difficult to get people to visit them as part of their weekly routine. The Council could help farmers markets by improving signage to make people aware when they were in town.

Whilst discussing the presentation Members raised the following points:

- National legislation, such as health and safety, often hindered local producers from selling directly to the public.
- many of the stall holders at local farmers markets also had farm shops; the market was a way of advertising their produce.
- Local markets were hindered by having to sell seasonal food and by people's habits of having the variety of choice and ease of access in supermarkets.
- There was a role for the Local Education Authority in teaching children the benefits of eating seasonal food.
- A number of supermarkets were moving towards selling more locally produced products, however there were issues around how local the food was after it has been packaged at regional hubs or via co-operatives.
- The farmers market charter gave the market added value that would prevent the market from reverting into a charter market.

The Chairman thanked the presenters for their time and the information provided. Members agreed that the next stage for the review was to invite officers from the Council's Procurement team to give evidence.

5 Review of Renewable Energy

(Councillor Emma Webster declared a personal and prejudicial interest in Agenda item 5 by virtue of the fact that her employer was looking at renewable resources in the District. As her interest was personal and prejudicial she left the meeting and took no part in the debate or voting on the matter).

Councillor Tony Vickers took the chair.

Councillor Paul Bryant attended the meeting for discussion on this item.

The Committee considered a report (Agenda Item 5) regarding a future scrutiny review into renewable energy. Members were informed that they were being asked to consider the draft terms of reference for a review into renewable energy arising from a motion put forward by Councillor Royce Longton at Council on 4 March 2010.

Members agreed that Councillor Tim Metcalfe, Councillor Roger Hunneman and Councillor Paul Bryant would form the membership of the task group.

Resolved that the terms of reference be agreed and the review placed on the Greener Select Committee's Work Programme.

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6 Work Programme

The Greener Select Committee considered a report (agenda item 6) concerning its future work programme.

Resolved that if Members were available on 24th May 2010 the Select Committee would consider waste and continue their review into the use of local resources.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.05 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature