

DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

ENVIRONMENT ADVISORY GROUP OPEN FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, 29 JANUARY 2024

Councillors Present: Stuart Gourley (Chairman), Richard Somner (Vice-Chairman), Carolyne Culver, Geoff Mayes and Martha Vickers

Also Present: Kofi Adu-Gyamfi (Service Lead - Climate Change), Jenny Graham (Environment Delivery Manager), Emily Ashton-Jelley (Principal Environment Delivery Officer), Daniel Warne (Waste Manager) and Elise Kinderman (Team Leader (Place)), Stephen Chard (Democratic Services Manager), Thomas Radbourne and Jo Watt (Member Services Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Dennis Benneyworth, Councillor Vicky Poole and Councillor Owen Jeffery

Councillor(s) Absent:

PART I

1 Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting were received from Councillors Dennis Benneyworth, Owen Jeffery and Vicky Poole.

2 Minutes of the previous Environment Advisory Group Open Forum and Matters Arising

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 27 November 2023 were approved as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

3 Declarations of Interest

During discussion of Agenda Item 5, Councillor Culver declared an interest as she had participated in a course run by Rachel Hammond (Regenerative Farming). As her interest was a personal or an other registrable interest, but not a disclosable pecuniary interest, she determined to remain to take part in the debate.

During discussion of Agenda Item 5, Councillors Tony Vickers and Martha Vickers declared an interest as they had a son working in the business of agro-forestry policy development. As their interest was a personal or an other registrable interest, but not a disclosable pecuniary interest, they determined to remain to take part in the debate.

4 Sulham Estate - Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and Nature Recovery Example

Ed Cooper (BioCap), gave a presentation to the Open Forum on the following:

- Introduction to BioCap
- Drivers of change – Biodiversity Loss, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), Climate Change, Nature Based Solutions, Brexit
- Sulham Estate Wood Meadows responding to change.
- Transformation of Sulham Estate Wood Meadows and work carried out.

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- The Chairman Councillor Stuart Gourley reported that he had visited the site before Christmas along with Councillor Martha Vickers and Councillor Tony Vickers, and met the landowner. The Chairman stated that it was a positive project to have in the district.

In response to questions, Ed Cooper responded as follows:

- Councillor Martha Vickers questioned the planting of walnut trees in the northern field. Ed Cooper responded that the walnut trees would be a long-term commitment that would be commercially viable.
- Councillor Carlyne Culver questioned what livestock was present at the farm. Ed Cooper responded that there were British Simmental cattle present at the farm. The farm would move to Sussex cattle which were more suitable.
- Councillor Martha Vickers questioned if the Sulham Estate plan would educate and raise awareness of BNG for other landowners. Ed Cooper stated that they had up to ten projects and would work with Jenny Graham & the Natural Solutions Delivery Partnership to explore the natural capital market. They were also looking at funding sources outside of BNG, with a potential for corporate investment into nature. Sulham Estate and other landowners formed a pilot project to prove revenue streams were viable. Once the revenue streams were proved viable, other landowners could adopt BNG.
- Ed Cooper reported that there were barriers to landowners participating in BNG, which would hopefully be diminished with further clarification from central government in the spring when it stated how BNG would be treated from a tax perspective.
- Councillor Martha Vickers questioned the management of the public and potential for dogs to cause issues with livestock. Ed Cooper stated that there would be hedgerows and fences to partially manage public access, ensuring there were quiet areas for livestock.
- Councillor Tony Vickers commended the early adoption of the BNG capital market and questioned the landowner's reliance on BNG. Ed Cooper stated that the landowner would be reliant on the BNG from planning applications in the mid-term. The landowner is hoping to produce a significant number of biodiversity units and to sell enough units to recoup funds spent.
- Councillor Culver questioned whether the ten projects would be within Berkshire. Ed Cooper responded that all the projects would be in West Berkshire.
- Councillor Culver questioned whether the projects formed part of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). Ed Cooper responded that the projects were a precursor to the delivery of the LNRS, however they would be compatible with the LNRS with the potential to create a funding route for its delivery. Ed Cooper stated that the projects could support the delivery of the LNRS, highlighting previous plans lack of completion.
- Councillor Culver questioned how West Berkshire compared to the other 5 unitary councils and neighbouring districts. Ed Cooper responded that Oxfordshire had been looking into similar projects. Oxfordshire had been a pilot area for the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA). Pilot areas had been further ahead than other areas. Ed Cooper reported West Berkshire at a similar stage to areas within the South Downs, which had a habitat bank underway.

Councillor Adrian Abbs questioned whether West Berkshire Council (WBC) had contacted Ed Cooper in relation to other potential projects. Kofi Adu-Gyamfi (Service Lead – Climate Change) reported that WBC had to remain neutral as a local planning authority working with Ed Cooper and other organisations. Councillor Abbs sought a conversation with Councillor Gourley regarding potential BNG projects.

5 Regenerative Farming

Rachel Hammond (Edge Landscaping), gave a presentation on the following:

- Building soil quantity and quality (for environmental benefit)
- Integrating trees (for environmental benefit)
- More local food production (with economy benefits) including the potential for market gardens in Newbury
- Regenerative Farming

Members posed a number of questions to Rachel Hammond, and she responded as follows:

- Councillor Martha Vickers questioned how the project would be coordinated and highlighted the need for Rachel Hammond to discuss with parish councils.
- Councillor Tony Vickers highlighted the shortage of allotments within Newbury and Greenham, as well as the lack of willingness of landowners to communicate in comparison to developers. Councillor Tony Vickers questioned whether Rachel Hammond had been in contact with developers. Rachel Hammond responded that they had not been in contact with local developers, the presentation had been a conceptual design.
- Councillor Culver declared an Interest, having taken part in a training programme run by Rachel Hammond. Councillor Culver supported the presentation with regards to market gardens and getting the public to appreciate the wider landscape and sought to use the Council's networks to progress Regenerative farming.
- Councillor Culver suggested Rachel Hammond speak at the Local Parish Climate Forum, and highlighted the need to develop human networks as well as the nature recovery networks.
- Ed Cooper noted that a pilot project could prove the commercial model would fit in with biodiversity models. A robust and commercial model was crucial. Rachel Hammond responded that 'incredible edible' had been a satisfactory case study that proved the success of regenerative farming.
- In response to a question from the Chairman, Rachel Hammond reported that they had not been in contact with parish councils. The Chairman stated that they would be in contact with Rachel Hammond.
- The Chairman questioned Rachel Hammond about the biggest obstacle for implementing regenerative farming in Newbury and wider areas. Rachel Hammond responded that the biggest obstacle would be the current food system, the modern system of farming, and the curriculum taught at agriculture colleges. Rachel Hammond stated that there would be a need to change the farming system in the future.
- Councillor Martha Vickers questioned whether money would be needed to start a project. Rachel Hammond responded that they were not looking for money but would be happy to advise a project in the local area, they also stated that projects such as Sulham Estate would be prime candidates to integrate regenerative farming into.

Councillor Culver stated that regenerative farming could help solve multiple social issues namely the cost-of-living crisis, and the prevention of health issues such as obesity. Councillor Culver also noted the potential job creation and suggested potential partnership with other organisations such as colleges. Such schemes can also help organisations to fulfil their Environment Social Governance commitments.

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- Councillor Martha Vickers highlighted the potential to partner with Newbury College which had similar projects underway.
- The Chairman noted that Rachel Hammond should speak at the District Parish Conference and the Local Parish Climate Forum.
- Councillor Tony Vickers recommended Rachel Hammond contact local developers such as Sandford and Bloor Homes, as well as Paul Hendry (Countryside Manager), and highlighted the country park that West Berkshire Council would take over from Bloor Homes two minutes away from Newbury College in the next few years.
- Councillor Tony Vickers and Councillor Martha Vickers declared an Interest that they had a son working in the business of agro-forestry policy development.
- Councillor Tony Vickers commended the potential health benefits and involvement of environmentally aware younger generations getting into business.
- Councillor Tony Vickers commented that a commercially run market garden could tie in with farmers markets and organic food shops and restaurants, with scope for competing at a different part of the market for the food, for people who would prefer alternatives to large supermarkets.

6 Wildflower Verges Trial Updates

Simon Claybourne, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire Wildlife Trusts (BBOWT), gave a presentation on the following:

- West Berkshire wild verges and their current management – these are cut twice a year in March and September.
- What the benefits of managing the wild verges would be – Increase in Biodiversity, No loss of safety or access, Possible cost saving.
- The results of a three-year survey of wild verges.
- What managing the wild verges would look like – under three categories i.e. high grade, medium Grade, and low Grade.
- How much it would cost to implement.

Simon Claybourne was asked several questions by members, and responded as follows:

- A report would be submitted to WBC outlining the findings from BBOWT.
- Councillor Culver highlighted the original set up of the project to provide baseline studies, and questioned whether there would be a relationship with BBOWT going forward on the project, or whether there would be a need to decide whether it would go any further, to decide which of the three options presented by Simon Claybourne would be implemented. Kofi Adu-Gyamfi (Service Lead – Climate Change) reported that the relationship between BBOWT and WBC had been under review with WBC lawyers investigating extensions. Kofi Adu-Gyamfi stated that next steps with the wild verge trial would be reviewed after receipt of a report from BBOWT.
- The Chairman questioned whether there would be a report on the various options provided to portfolio holders. Simon Claybourne responded that a report would be presented to WBC, and they had been in contact with Paul Hendry.
- The Chairman questioned whether there was a plan to tackle the low-grade areas to balance the cost to benefit ratio. Simon Claybourne responded that the best cost-to-benefit ratio would be provided by tackling the high-grade areas first.
- Councillor Culver highlighted complaints from parish councillors, primarily on lack of verge cutting. Councillor Culver stated that alongside a wild verge policy an information campaign would be needed to educate the public about the benefits.
- Councillor Culver highlighted that wild verges could be integrated into other projects.

7 Open discussion by EAG about topics discussed or suggestions of potential future topics

- Councillor Abbs requested an update on wind and disturbed wind projects, that could start to make a difference, with a potential for WBC to be an incubator for further projects. Councillor Abbs would be interested in roof top micro wind projects.
- Councillor Abbs asked for an update on the micro hydro project, especially how it could be combined with heat exchanger technologies within the water courses and feed into the Lido.
- The Chairman highlighted the significant waterways in West Berkshire and the opportunities for micro hydro power.
- Councillor Culver raised the need for more environmental schemes to mitigate flooding, using more than mechanical schemes.
- The Chairman stated the Eastbury flood alleviation scheme had been mostly nature based rather than concrete and was a good example of a nature-based flood mitigation scheme.
- Ed Cooper suggested inviting Action for the River Kennet (ARK) to the Open Forum, who had been looking into integrated constructed wetlands to help water companies combat issues.
- Councillor Culver highlighted the integrated constructed wetland in Hampstead Norreys.
- The Chairman felt that a brainstorming session would be useful to focus on the longer-term strategy of bringing WBC to net zero as well as the wider district, with the potential for targeted topics in one half of an Open Forum.

Councillor Martha Vickers stated that the EAG Open Forum could be promoted at the Parish Climate Forum to encourage representatives from parishes to attend, with an emphasis that they could contribute.

8 Any Other Business

None to report.

9 Future Meeting Dates

The next meeting is scheduled for Monday 25 March 2024

(The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm and closed at 6.22 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature

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