

Appendix 3.8 Farming Community

Event	Consultation with farming community
Date	February 2018
Purpose	To canvass views on the Neighbourhood Plan amongst the farming community
Evidence Report by	Liz Townsend and Brian Freeston

Introduction

Three farmers interviewed with land (One small farm, two larger enterprises, all with varying mixed usage) situated all or partly within the Cranleigh Parish boundary. Generally family businesses handed down through the generations engendering a very strong attachment to the land. The farmers saw themselves as custodians of the landscape.

Farming was acknowledged to be an isolated occupation with few opportunities to meet with other similar businesses, however attempts to arrange wider group meetings have proved to be unsuccessful.

None of the interviewees had been approached by Waverley Borough Council in connection with the Local Plan or Economic Development. It was felt that farming had a very low priority in Waverley and was not even on the Council's radar.

Concerns were raised about the significant amount of residential development in and around Cranleigh, this would result in an increase in vehicle movements on the rural road network and have a detrimental impact on farmers when moving stock (incidents reported of road rage amongst motorists towards farmers had increased and one farmer reported a recent incident of physical assault). Despite the rural nature of the area, People appeared to be far less considerate towards farmers using the road network, not only when they were moving stock but also when using farm vehicles on the road to move between areas of land.

The interviewees felt that additional local affordable housing would probably have little impact on the supply of farm workers, although it was generally welcomed.

Products

Meat (beef, lamb), cheese, cattle feed (forage), wheat and milk.

Broadband

Slow broadband speed was highlighted as a problem in some areas despite fibre being available, however the cost was prohibitive to install fibre from the public highway, where it is installed, to farm buildings. Some funding towards this cost would be helpful.

Employment

Difficulties in attracting farming staff had been experienced, this was mainly but not solely attributed to lack of local entrants to farming, negative perception of farming as a career, high local house prices and the cost of supplying tied housing. Farming was now far more technical in nature and there was perceived to be a lack of information, training courses and qualifications available. Attempts to arrange a talk on farming as a career was not taken up by Glebelands.

Brexit

Queries concerning the impact of a reduction in supply of employees from EU countries post Brexit did not appear to be viewed as a serious problem.

There were concerns expressed with regard to the receipt and level of EU farm subsidy payments which will be made until 2024 but there was no information available as to what would happen after this. There were also considered to be some advantages to be had in exchange rates for exported produce.

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Opportunities

It was acknowledged that farms needed to diversify in areas such as the commercial use of outbuildings, glamping, residential conversions of outbuildings under permitted development rights, renting additional houses on farmland, as well as taking advantage of local opportunities to sell high quality produce (meat, milk, cheese) which would result in lower costs for farmers in getting their produce to market (Example South Downs Food and Drink Portal <http://www.southdownsfood.org/>).

Collectively the three farms considered they produced enough meat to feed the entire parish all year round. Meat was sold direct from two of the farms, and there were opportunities to expand with demand for local high-quality meat on the increase, however substantial investment in technology, training and premises would be required to take advantage of this market. There were also opportunities to build stronger links with local butchers and restaurants/chefs. Their shared experience of the financial success of local farm shops was mixed.

Additional opportunities were identified in the recent boost in demand for raw milk, the siting of communication masts on farmland, renewable energy and also providing wider recreational access to the countryside, although this needed to be subject to tight controls to ensure the safety of users, as well as farm animals, were maintained as well ensuring the protection of crops and local biodiversity.

Overall, it was recognised that farmers needed to diversify to survive. One of the interviewees was running a successful farm café and industrial estate on part of their land. There were opportunities to expand this type of enterprise further and there appeared to be high demand.

Threats

While farm buildings and agricultural land are exempt from business rates as long as they are being used for agriculture, diversified farm businesses are often subject to business rates. The interviewees saw little benefit to them from these payments.

The Valuations Office Agency (VOA) reassessed the Rateable Value (RV) of every commercial property in the country, including diversified farm businesses with new rates with effect from 1 April 2017. This has meant that farmers have faced huge increases in business rates, or have had to make large payments for the first time.

There were complaints about the level of business rates charged which were not commensurate with other farming areas across the country. It was quoted that the business rates in this area were 3 times higher than that charged around Manchester.

The closure of Guildford cattle market means that the nearest market is now in Hailsham which takes over an hour and half in car. This longer distance means that it is now far more expensive to move cattle with at least a three hour round trip for farmers and livestock, with associated welfare issues also highlighted.

Furthermore, over the last decade more than a third of small abattoirs have closed which has impacted on the distances that livestock now have to travel, and this also results in additional costs to farmers.

It was recognised that people wanted cheap food but there had to be a balance between quality food, welfare standards and realistic prices to the consumer.

Surrey Young Farmers Clubs used to run regular events however this seems to be on the downturn meaning that the farming community could become even more isolated in the future.

Climate change was also identified as an issue which affected lambing season as well as the sowing, growth, and harvesting of crops. Farmers needed to have additional capacity to store water so that they could deal with drought situations, however this was costly. In drought situations farmers are often allowed to abstract additional amounts of water from local rivers which are already reported as running extremely low.

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Farming Organisations referred to:

British Grasslands Society <http://www.britishgrassland.com>

National Farmers Union (NFU) <https://www.nfuonline.com/home/>

Arla UK <https://www.arlafoods.co.uk/>