

23 OCTOBER 1997

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

LIAISON MEETING WITH NATIONAL FARMERS' UNION

Notes of a meeting of the Liaison Meeting with the National Farmers' Union held in Committee Room 1, at Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Thursday, 23 October 1997.

Present:

Ms E Malcolm	-	Director of Environment Services
D A Gurney	-	Director of Finance and Administration
Miss J Debnam	-	Committee Administrator
C Gilmour	-	Chief Solicitor
N Miller	-	Economic Development Officer
Miss J Norman	-	Team Leader Policy Plans and Information
R Merrett	-	Chief Environmental Health Officer
J Kerbey	-	Chairman New Forest Branch, National Farmers' Union
A Goodall	-	Member of National Farmers' Union
C Whitlock	-	Group Secretary, National Farmers' Union
Ms E Tanner	-	Senior Technical Adviser, National Farmers' Union

1. WELCOME.

Liz Malcolm, as Chairman of the meeting, welcomed the representatives of the National Farmers' Union to the Liaison Meeting.

2. PLANNING.

(i) Draft Revised PPG7

Mr Whitlock sought the Council's views on the draft revised PPG7. The National Farmers' Union was concerned that conservation may be given emphasis at the expense of other things which were valued.

The Council had welcomed the publication of the draft revised PPG7, which reflected many policies which were already operating in the District, and recognised the status of the New Forest Heritage Area. It was inevitable that, in an area like the New Forest, high priority would be given to environmental issues. The Council had supported the tightening of controls over agricultural permitted development and also the emphasis on the re-use of redundant agricultural buildings for employment uses. The Council's policies already favoured employment use, and reflected the PPG's new requirement for each application to be considered on its merits, taking account of possible planning gains, such as the re-location of "undesirable" farming businesses from villages.

It was recognised that the imposition and enforcement of agricultural occupancy conditions was a difficult area. This was complicated when there were two breadwinners in the family. The Council normally used conditions, but occasionally a Section 106 agreement was a useful mechanism to control usage. There was a continuing need to maintain a stock of buildings within the New Forest for the use of agricultural workers.

(ii) **Reservoirs**

Planning permission was not normally required for the construction of reservoirs for irrigation, unless an Article 4 Direction had been imposed on an area (as in the Avon Valley). It was noted that increasing numbers of farmers would need to construct reservoirs as controls increased on irrigation, with the preparation of LEAP's by the Environment Agency.

(iii) **Polytunnels**

Local planning authorities varied in their interpretation of the need for planning permission for polytunnels. In the New Forest District each case was judged on the degree of permanence of the structure. Local growers were invited to contact the Council for advice if they were in any doubt.

(iv) **Urban Fringe**

Fly tipping was not a major problem, but had increased slightly since the introduction of the Landfill Tax. The Council would remove any material tipped on highway land if they were told of its presence

(v) **Plastic Recycling**

Previous plans to introduce recycling of black plastic packaging on farms had not been progressed. It was agreed that the Council's Recycling Officer would contact the local branch of the NFU to see if this could be progressed. It was likely that farmers would be prepared to pay a small charge for this service. The Council remained very active in promoting recycling.

Action: Mary Rainbow

(vi) **Farm Diversification**

The value of farm diversification schemes was discussed. Farm diversification schemes were aided where the farmer could submit a Farm Plan which set out the long term context for the proposals. These could, however, be expensive to produce.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH.

(i) **Nuisances**

The problem of conflict between long established farming practices and new domestic neighbours was discussed. This was a difficult area. Complaints of nuisances from farms were considered differently to factory premises, recognising the history of legislation, case law and also that some functions would be hard to carry out any other way. Guidelines on best practice from bodies such as the NFU and ADAS were useful in reaching a judgement. People moving into the countryside often had

unrealistic expectations, and did not recognise that farming practices could be smelly, and also noisy at unsocial hours. This did not, however, make farmers immune from formal action. The Authority might require the farmer to introduce the best available practice to minimise any nuisance.

The NFU was concerned that the introduction of best available practice could involve considerable cost, and at a time when profit margins were becoming increasingly tight.

The NFU's attention was drawn to new proposals on legislation to control air pollution. If proposals requiring the use of "best available techniques" were no longer qualified by consideration of cost, this might have implications for larger farming practices. The NFU may wish to pursue this.

(ii) **Bird Scarers**

Copies of the code of practice issued by the NFU had been received by the Council and, in fact, used in cases where the guidelines were not being followed. The NFU offered to assist in mediation to resolve individual cases.

(iii) **Dogs on Farmland**

There were problems with dog fouling crops adjacent to public rights of way in some areas. While new legislation would allow the Council to introduce controls over fouling of footpaths, it would not cover private land unless the owner specifically requested it. The problem of policing the controls would remain. Also, the problem may be worsened if "Right to Roam" legislation was introduced.

Education remained the key, and was the most effective way for the Council to use its limited resources. It might be possible to assist by including messages about dogs on farmland in the forthcoming responsible ownership campaign.

Action: Bob Merrett

4. HAMPSHIRE FARMING STUDY.

New Forest District Council had commented to the County Council on this interesting study, in particular on the need to apply employment protection policies for the re-use of redundant agricultural buildings, and supporting the establishment of a database to put potential employment users in touch with the owners of suitable buildings. The Council also supported the development of other rural employment initiatives. They did not, however, believe that new buildings in the countryside could be made acceptable merely because they were well designed.

In addition to general concerns about the high average age of the farming population in Hampshire, the NFU had particular concerns about the future of commoning which was perceived, increasingly, as giving too little reward. BSE

was of particular concern in the Forest, and might affect the grazing regime. The NFU was working on seeking Less Favoured Area status for the New Forest, under Article 25 of European Council Regulation 950/97, to try to help. The MEP for the area and the New Forest Committee had been contacted for support.

One particular problem in the Forest was the disposal of carcasses of dead beasts. The problem, caused by the demise of the knacker trade, would be further exacerbated with the closure of the hunt kennels. Burial was not a practical option, and indeed was specifically prohibited on Forestry Commission owned farms or near water sources. It was agreed that the Chief Environmental Health Officer would discuss this issue further with the NFU.

Action: Bob Merrett

5. ACCESS.

The NFU had not yet published its Rights of Way policy, pending publication of the Government's proposals on the Right to Roam. The NFU recognised that the Government's manifesto advocated increased rights of access and that they must take a pragmatic approach. In the Forest, the development of cycling may cause problems. Following the common usage of the term "Forest" to describe the New Forest Heritage Area, the public found it difficult to distinguish common land, where they had a right of access, from private land where they did not. It was hoped that the way marking of cycle routes by the Forestry Commission would help to minimise this problem.

6. STATE OF THE FARMING INDUSTRY.

The number of cases of BSE was reducing in the cattle population in line with the Government's predictions. Cohort groups were being removed from the national herd although, unfortunately, in some areas record keeping was poor and it was difficult or impossible to identify the cohorts concerned.

All sections of the agricultural industry were suffering from falling commodity prices, reducing margins.

There were concerns about the forthcoming review of the Common Agricultural Policy, particularly as it was clear that there would be no additional resources available. The conservation of the countryside depended upon the custodianship of viable farm businesses, as demonstrated in the Hampshire Farming Study.

7. MAINTENANCE OF WATER COURSES.

Responsibility for the maintenance of water courses had become confused over recent years, with local authorities clearing some roadside ditches even though they were on private land and therefore the responsibility of the landowner. The maintenance of the network of water courses and ditches was vital for effective drainage. It would be helpful if local farmers could be reminded of the need to keep watercourses clear, to help drainage. The NFU would include an item in their local journal.

Action: Liz Tanner

8. HEDGEROW PROTECTION.

It was noted that there were no particular problems arising from the introduction of the Hedgerow Regulations. The removal of hedgerows had not been a high profile problem over recent years - the majority of the hedgerow removal having taken place in the 1960's. The loss of hedgerows now tended to be a more insidious process.

9. FOOD LEGISLATION.

It was reported that there may be changes to the legislation controlling food hygiene in the light of the investigation into the E.Coli outbreak in Scotland over Christmas. It was likely that the Government would expect rigorous enforcement of hygiene standards in the food retail industry and would take a more pro-active approach than the previous administration.

The NFU reported that improved hygiene standards were being driven by consumer demand through the large supermarket chains and other retail outlets.

10. NATIONAL PARK EQUIVALENT STATUS.

It was reported that the need for National Park equivalent status for the New Forest, with a tailor-made constitution, had been raised at a fringe meeting at the recent Labour Party Conference. A motion had been passed in support. In addition, the Council for National Parks had started a campaign for National Park status for both the South Downs and the New Forest. The District Council supported the tailor-made approach, and would not welcome the introduction of a 1949 Act National Park Body. This view was supported by the NFU.

11. FUTURE MEETINGS.

It was agreed that a Liaison Meeting should be held on an annual basis in October or November. The NFU was happy for this to continue to operate at the officer level of the Council.

CHAIRMAN