

FRIGSE

FARMING AND RURAL ISSUES GROUP

South-East of England

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1) Chairman

Earlier this year I was asked if I would take over as Chairman of FRIGSE from Andrew Colquhoun. Having accepted; it has taken me some time to get to grips with the workings of FRIGSE, but I now feel that I have a better understanding of what our role is and how best we might take things forward.

This first newsletter attempts to round up some of the issues that we have been dealing with over the last 6 months and points to a number of others that are currently on our radar. No doubt there will be plenty of new issues cropping up as we approach the end of 2015 and look forward to the New Year.

Before writing further about some of the detail of the various meetings and activities that have taken place recently; I would like to pay tribute to the hard work that Andrew Colquhoun has put into FRIGSE in his time as your Chairman. He has done a great job, and on behalf of the membership, I would like to record our sincere thanks to him here. Andrew has already said that he will be pleased to come along to our next meeting and I have extended an invitation to him to attend as many meetings in the future as he would like to. I know that he will always have a valuable contribution to make.

2) Lord Gardiner – South of England Show – 12th June 2015

Andrew Colquhoun, William White, Robin Edwards and I met with Lord Gardiner at the South of England Show to discuss current issues.

The key points raised with the Minister were:-

Solar Power

Land owners are committed to the generation of renewable energy in various forms from their land, and in particular solar power. Investment in solar installations would be enhanced if progress could be made to the supporting infrastructure; in some parts of the South East, there is now not sufficient grid capacity to take additional solar generation.

REPRESENTING:

British Agricultural & Garden Machinery Association (BAGMA), Country Land & Business Association (CLA), Countryside Alliance, English Beef and Lamb Executive (EBLEX), National Farmers' Union (NFU), National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs (NFYC), National Trust, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), Confederation of Forestry Industries UK Ltd (Confor), British Institute of Agricultural Consultants (BIAC), Horticultural Trades Association, Landex South-East Colleges

Planning & Development

Improvements to food security requires a multi-faceted approach from Government. A key area of sustainable intensification of food and plant production lies in the expansion of the glasshouse and protected crop sectors to provide larger, technically more advanced and productive units. Currently, the localism agenda appears to be operating counter to the aims of national policy; with many Local Authorities refusing planning applications for such schemes.

FRIGSE welcomes the Government's initiative to introduce more Food Enterprise Zones and encourages the Government to introduce more. In principle, the Zones should be able to ease some of the planning problems which farmers and growers face.

Right to Buy

We have concerns that the suggested Government policy of allowing Housing Association tenants the right to buy will undoubtedly curtail the number of landowners prepared to release land for affordable housing schemes.

Rural Broadband

FRIGSE believes that it is more important for rural businesses to get some basic level of coverage at an early stage, rather than being promised ultra-fast broadband at some unknown time in the future.

3) FRIGSE Meeting – Growtrain Offices, Oving, Chichester, West Sussex – 21st July 2015

This was the first time that I had the opportunity to meet more of our members and to take part in a full FRIGSE meeting.

The main points of discussion were: Bovine TB, the Ornamental Round Table initiative, Planning & Development issues, Food, Plant & Energy Security, Countryside Stewardship, Woodland Schemes & Grants, Forestry Commission & Biomass initiatives and Food Enterprise Zones.

4) Defra – Farming Stakeholder Forum – 4th August 2015

I attended this Forum at Nobel House, London on behalf of FRIGSE to discuss a 25 year strategy for Defra. Barriers to growth and productivity were the main topics discussed; including:-

- Extensive, fast and reliable broadband services
- High quality, widely available mobile communications
- Modern transport connections
- Access to high quality education and training
- Expanded apprenticeships in rural areas
- Enterprise Zones in rural areas
- Better regulation and improved planning for rural businesses
- More housing

- Increased availability of affordable childcare
- Devolution of power

As you can imagine, there were also wide ranging discussions about animal and plant health, breeding programmes, access to technology, tenancy issues, applied research, flood risk and all the issues around water; but the key points above were felt to be those of most strategic importance in terms of barriers to growth and productivity.

5) Plan to Grow Conference – 18th November 2015

More than 120 people attended a conference at Farbridge, West Dean, Chichester on Wednesday 18th November 2015.

The key sponsors for the day were: HSBC, NFU, Chichester District Council (CDC), Langmead Group, NFU Mutual and West Sussex Growers' Association (WSGA).

The Chairman for the day was Steve Oates (Economic Development Manager at CDC) and the opening speech was given by Tony Dignum (Leader of Chichester District Council).

- Session One: Economics & Planning Development; was chaired by William White (Regional Director at NFU) and included the following speakers: Martin Redfearn (Regional Agricultural Director at HSBC), Andrew Frost (Head of Planning at CDC), Gary Taylor (Chairman of AHDB-Horticulture) and Robert Searle (Finance Director at Tangmere Airfield Nurseries).
- Session Two: Water; was chaired by John Hall (WSGA, FRIGSE & Horticultural Business Consultant) and included the following speakers: James Humphrys (Environment Agency Area Manager of Solent & South Downs), Jerry Knox (Associate Professor at Cranfield University) and Paul Dracott (East Malling Research).
- Session Three: Smart Technology – The Future; was chaired by Chris Moncrieff (Production Director at Vitacress) and included the following speakers: Helen Ferrier (NFU Chief Science & Regulatory Affairs Advisor), Robert Heikens (Energy 4 Growth) and Matthew Howard (Lecturer in Robotics Research at Kings College London).

Graham Bryant (Chairman – WSGA) gave a summary of the conference in his closing remarks.

Following on from the Plan to Grow conference, 75 people attended the 89th WSGA Autumn Dinner at Farbridge, West Dean. All the ingredients for the Dinner were sourced locally, including: Selsey crab & mackerel, Chichester rye bread, pork from Adsdean Farm, Funtington, with seasonal vegetables, autumn berries from Hall Hunter, Chichester and ice cream from Carolines Dairy at Sidlesham. Lychgate White and Pinot Noir wines were from the Bolney Estate at Bolney and the Crafted Coffee Company of Lavant provided freshly brewed coffee.

The wine from Bolney Estates was sponsored by Fargro, the table poinsettias were donated by Hill Brothers and Roger Lapin, the table magician, was sponsored by John Hall Consulting.

The venue and dinner were enjoyed by a good cross section of friends and colleagues from within West Sussex Growers' Association and the wider community. WSGA Chairman, Graham Bryant, wound up the evening with an entertaining speech.

The sweepstake raised £380 towards our newly established "WSGA Young Growers' Fund".

6) Food Enterprise Zones (FEZ)

- Reading Agricultural Consultants have now completed a feasibility study into the identification of possible Food Enterprise Zones within Arun District Council (ADC). A draft proposal is expected to be published by ADC before the end of the year.
- A further Food Enterprise Zone is planned for the South Downs National Park. Has anyone got up to date information on this?
- Do FRIGSE members have information as to the progress of other FEZ within the South East of England?

7) Biomass & Alternative Energy

A Forestry Commission workshop was held at Billingshurst, West Sussex on 23rd October to further discuss the logistics of supplying wood chip from woodland in the SE to commercial customers in the region.

A joint meeting between the Agricultural & Horticultural Development Board (AHDB) and the International Plant Propagators Society (IPPS) took place in West Sussex on 10th November 2015. The group visited Hill Brothers Nurseries, Runcton, Chichester and Freshacres Nurseries, Walberton, Arundel to look at recent biomass boiler installations.

Following the nursery visits, Fargo sponsored a seminar for about 70 delegates at the Chichester Park Hotel, to discuss various options for alternative energy systems. Ben Cross (Crosslands Nurseries) and Barry Frost (Toddington Nurseries) spoke about recent biomass installations on their nurseries and I spoke on behalf of West Sussex Growers' Association and FRIGSE about other alternative energy installations taking place in Agriculture, Horticulture and Rural Businesses. Jon Swain & Tom Wilkins (Farm Energy Centre) spoke about renewable energy options and the economics of investing in renewable energy schemes.

Fargo sponsored a very successful dinner that evening at which Raoul Curtis-Machin (HTA) welcomed everyone and Chris Beytes (Ball Publishing) gave a talk on the evolution of grower-retailer relationships in the USA.

8) Government Autumn Statement & Budget

On 25th November 2015, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the following changes:-

a) Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC)

DECC's budget will be reduced by 22% over the next four years, delivered through efficiencies in corporate services and reducing the cost of contracts.

The Department's innovation programme will, however, be doubled to £500m over the next five years, which will strengthen the future security of supply, reduce the costs of decarbonisation and boost industrial and research capabilities.

The official Autumn Statement document reads: "DECC will deliver £220m of resource savings by 2019-20 through efficiencies from pooling back office and corporate services, and reducing the costs of contracts to manage the country's historic coal and nuclear liabilities."

b) Department of the Environment, Farming & Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

Day-to-day spending at DEFRA - which has responsibility for safeguarding Britain's natural environment - will fall by 15%. As part of that, the department's administration costs will be slashed by 26%.

DEFRA will have £2bn set aside to protect 300,000 homes from flooding, while £130m capital investment will go towards the department's science estates and equipment by 2020.

The document adds: "Through its ambitious efficiencies programme, DEFRA will become a more streamlined, digital department, sharing back office functions like IT, human resources and finance with its network bodies to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, and devolving roles to the local frontline to ensure effective service delivery."

c) Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI)

The RHI scheme, which provides financial incentives to suppliers of renewable heat, will see its funding rise to £1.15bn by 2021, "to ensure that the UK continues to make progress towards its climate goals."

However, this actually means that spending on the RHI scheme will be around £690m lower than what was originally forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR). The UK still needs 20TWh more renewable heat by 2020, to meet the Government's 12% target.

Responding to the announcement, Renewable Energy Association (REA) chief executive Nina Skorupska said: "Our members recognised the need to make savings and presented to Treasury and DECC how we could optimise the RHI budget. A £700m cut is large, but we look forward to working with the government on reforming this crucial area."

9) National Living Wage

The following is an extract of an email sent to MPs, concerning the National Living Wage, on 27th October 2015, by West Sussex Growers' Association:-

..... Although WSGA supports the principle of the National Living Wage, we have a number of very serious concerns:-

- The planned sudden increase in the NLW will put many jobs and businesses at risk.*
- This dramatic wage increase will not just affect those few workers on the lowest hourly rate in our Industry, but will have a differential knock on effect right up through the pay scales.*
- Most of our members supply fresh produce direct to retailers throughout the UK. In an already very competitive market, retailers are currently putting more and more pressure on suppliers' margins. The likelihood of farmers & growers being able to pass wage rises on to retailers and customers is therefore zero.*
- In addition, the strong pound is already making the UK market even more attractive to our overseas competitors.*
- In common with most other industries, there is no doubt that these combined pressures will put many jobs and businesses at risk in West Sussex.*

10) Coast to Capital (C2C) Forum – Gatwick

The 9th C2C Forum was held at Gatwick on 3rd November 2015. Many regional issues were discussed; such as transport, a second runway for Gatwick Airport and continuing problems with skills shortages.

The lack of progress with improvements to the A27 and continued difficulties with poor or non-existent broadband in rural areas was highlighted as a barrier to growth by many.

11) Broadband

As you will know yourselves and from comments made under various headings above; the lack of basic broadband in rural areas is a major concern and it is still an issue that FRIGSE must champion.

The Government previously committed to a universal service commitment of 2Mbps to every premise in the UK. This commitment appears to have slipped to 2017 at best. It's interesting to note that some countries are managing to achieve 100Mbps in rural areas.

The highly publicised target coverage of 95% of UK premises to be superfast enabled by either Phase 1 or Phase 2 of the superfast roll-out will not be met. A more realistic coverage will be closer to 85% coverage.

12) Red Tape

We were asked to contribute to the "*Cut Red Tape*" initiative consultation being carried out by the Cabinet Office. I put forward the following suggestions that are of most concern to FRIGSE members:-

- Massive bureaucracy (cost, time effort) around the grants application process, which disproportionately impacts on the unsupported sector.
- Defra & the Rural Payments Agency still likes to gold plate EU rules concerning the setting up of Cooperatives and Leader funded projects. This deters businesses and organisations from putting forward applications for financial support for worthwhile schemes.
- The power given to local residents through the Localism Bill works against the planning and development of major rural projects such as intensive farming, horticultural and other rural projects, that by their very nature have to be built in open countryside e.g. large dairy and poultry units, glasshouse and packhouse facilities.
- The ability of opposition groups to hold up proposed rural developments and draw out the planning process that adds enormous financial and time costs, deters businesses from making planning applications.
- Too much duplication in the various Farm Assurance Schemes.
- The costs in administering and managing various schemes such as: workers' pension schemes, employment legislation and assurance schemes are totally disproportionate for smaller businesses and organisations.