

# Wokingham Society

Open Meeting on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010 at the Bradbury Centre, Wokingham at  
8.00pm

## Our Environment

Present: Members of the Executive Committee of the Wokingham Society: Peter Must (Chairman), John Bingham (Vice-Chairman), David Tinker (President), Neil Hines (Treasurer), Jane Bingham (Membership Secretary), Hazel Guile (Planning Officer), Ann Davis, John Griffin (Secretary)

Also Present: Members of the Wokingham Society and Members of the public.

Visiting Speakers from the Environment Agency:

Terry Wright, Liaison Officer

Brian Roberts, Flood Risk Management Officer

Clare Williams, Member of the Development and Flood Relief Team

Peter Must started the meeting by advising those present that Wokingham Borough Council had suspended its Core Strategy. The Executive was, however, proceeding with its consideration of the Town Centre Development Master plan. The Council's latest proposals showed little change despite public concern about the proposed use of Elms Field. The Chairman noted that of the 653 individual responses posted by the public, 581 rejected the proposal for building development on the open green space at Elms Field. No evidence has been forthcoming about the Council's premise that the Town Centre is dying and the Society will continue to press for evidence. He urged as many people as possible to attend the meeting of the Executive on 24 June.

Peter Must then proceeded to the main business of the evening by welcoming and introducing the visitors from the Environment Agency. Terry Wright was invited to speak first and he outlined the responsibilities and functions of the Environmental Agency which he divided into two categories: *Home and Leisure* and *Business and Industry*. He said that flooding is a major concern and the Agency looks at it holistically, emphasising the need for preparation of at-risk flood areas and advising householders, businesses and Local Authorities on how to manage flooding. The Agency is also responsible for Fisheries and Outdoor Recreation and this involves preserving the habitat, restocking the rivers, licensing and controlling fishing and providing proper facilities for boating on all rivers. He stressed that the Agency wants people to enjoy the environment, but it is essential that farmers and businesses should respect the environment and that waste is dealt with appropriately so that the Thames and other rivers are not polluted. The Agency aims to be as green as possible by checking its carbon footprint and recycling wherever possible. It is responsible for wildlife conservation and it is particularly watchful of the ways in which businesses protect the environment. To ensure this happens the Agency has been given enforcement power, but it prefers to adopt a softer rather than an aggressive approach to ensure compliance. He referred to the Local Resilience Forum which helps local Authorities,

businesses and householders deal with emergencies in an organised way. Finally he said that it is inevitable that flooding will occur but that preparation is the best means of combating it. Unfortunately, he said, not everyone can be protected.

Brian Roberts then told the meeting that his role was to provide technical and specialist information for the identification and management of schemes for flood relief. He stressed that it is not possible to defend against all floods, but management is the key word. He advised that there are two types of water course: main rivers and ditches. Main rivers are the responsibility of the Agency, while ditches and similar water courses are the responsibility of the Local Authority. **The Flood and Water Management Act of 2010** gives clear directions as to who holds responsibility for flood relief, whether it be the Agency, Local Authorities or landowners. The Agency regularly inspects the condition of culverts, sluices, banks and other flood defences and the Flood Risk Management team regularly sends information to its partners so that people living on flood plains can adjust to and improve their situation. Information is provided across all media. The Agency must ensure that a serviceable standard is maintained and projects for improvement, ranging in cost from a few thousand to several million pounds, are developed with organisations like the National Trust and other landowners, always bearing in mind the need to operate within a national framework. In conclusion he said that the Agency is responsible for completing the repair of flood defences, updating them as far as possible. It has powers to take action against any obstructions on flood plains and it is responsible for the maintenance of reservoirs. It must ensure that it keeps in contact with local organisations such as Residents Associations while promoting Government targets and monitoring other agencies' development projects on flood plains, ensuring they are aware of the biodiversity of the area and the need for the proper disposal of waste.

Carol Williams then concentrated on defining her team's responsibilities. Primarily, she said, they must respond to local development projects, commenting on Core Strategies and plans for development on flood plains in particular. The Local Authority must be advised on flood risk, the nature of biodiversity and the disposal of waste.

At this point Peter Must asked for questions and the ensuing discussion focussed almost exclusively on Wokingham Borough and the possible effects of the enactment of the Core Strategy. Questions were asked about the enforcement powers of the Agency and the questioners were advised that the 2008 Act clarifies the situation although the full impact of the Act will not be known until 2013. It was stated that under the Act the Agency's powers are primarily those of monitoring and advising, but the responsibility for action and implementation lies with the Local Authority which must legally accept the Agency as a statutory consultee. When asked who has the responsibility for overseeing problems which may arise from building on land in South Wokingham where the subsoil is mainly gravel, out of which water arises, Clare Williams advised that it would be the responsibility of Wokingham Borough Council as are all ground/surface water issues.

Concern was then expressed about the capability and expertise of Local Authorities when dealing with such matters and the meeting was advised that, although most Councils do not have a drainage engineer, Wokingham does in fact have one, and the Agency also provides Councils with a matrix to help them in their planning. It is recognised that North and South

Wokingham are fluvial flood plains and the audience was told that any resident with knowledge of potential risks in those areas should inform the Council, copying the Agency when doing so. Developers must also make a flood risk assessment.

It was then established that the Agency is responsible for the Emmbrook from its junction with the Lodden as far as Tesco's store on Finchampstead Road. Thereafter, as an ordinary watercourse, it is the responsibility of the Council. All work done by the Agency on the Emm Brook such as tree clearing and litter tidying cannot be done during the bird nesting season, but otherwise the work is done regularly; the dates and times of these operations are posted on the Agency's website. In response to a request from the Friends of the Emm Brook for better access to information, Terry Wright promised to contact the organisation with a view to facilitating a two-way process of communication.

There was then considerable discussion about the input of the Agency into Wokingham Borough Council's Core Strategy and its assessment of risk. The questioners were told that there had been some input, primarily concerned with flood risk and biodiversity. The Agency has also been consulted on the SDP and its comments are available on the website. Clare Williams pointed out that the Local Authority must supply adequate surface water drainage and assess whether its actions will increase the flood risk. The Agency can make a protest if its advice has appeared not to be heeded, but the Council must make the ultimate decision, ensuring that sustainable drainage systems are provided. In addition the Council must check that everything that must be done by the Developers has been done.

When asked if the Agency had analysed the cause and effect of recent flooding in Wokingham, Brian Roberts stated that there has been a study of the Lodden and the Emm Brook based on the supposition that an increase in waste will lead to flooding. It was suggested to the panel that a model based on recent real flooding events could be instructive and helpful and that there should be powers of enforcement whenever inadequate drainage is discovered.

These points were noted and the Chairman then drew the meeting to a close by thanking the visitors for their frank and informative presentation and he noted that they had provided copies of *Living on the Edge* and *Are You Ready?* for those present to take away with them. Terry Wright responded by urging all present to contact him about any concerns they may have and to look at the Agency's website for further information. Finally each speaker was presented with a copy of *Bygone Days*.