

Appendix C – summary of written responses and consultation meetings

Meetings

Meeting with the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) – 24th July 2018

The CLA were keen to emphasise the importance of the government's recent consultation paper, 'Health and Harmony – the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit' in terms of driving future policy. This in turn emphasises the need for farmers to have the flexibility to provide 'public goods', which will be the cornerstone of new policies, for example through increasing biodiversity, improving soil health through increasing soil carbon, practicing conservation agriculture, providing public access, conserving water and mitigating flood risk. These themes provide a link to the concept of natural capital, the opportunity for innovation (eg. opportunities from increased rural recreation) and collaboration (eg. machinery sharing between farms). The importance of woodland planting and management was also noted.

Meeting with the Tenant Farmers' Association (TFA) – 29th August 2018

Discussions were generally based on the written response which is detailed further below. Various Local Authorities are reviewing their farm estates at present, or have reviewed them recently. The TFA urged CBC to provide clear expectations on the outcome of the review and start to map out what the 30 holdings might look like. There was acknowledgement of CBC's aspirations for further public access on the estate, but the TFA pointed out that this need to be controlled, and there was discussion over how CBC and tenants could prevent unauthorised access. The idea of 'no agenda' visits to holdings were suggested by the TFA in order to engage with tenants at their farm on a range of subjects they might want to discuss; a programme of such visits was initiated by CBC several years ago and could be reinstated. There was discussion on the backlog of maintenance works and the need to prioritise key works, the need for longer term tenancies, the need for bad debt to be managed and reduced, and opportunities for co-operation between tenants. There was further discussion over the impact of Brexit, the potential for improved communication and feedback between CBC and its tenants and opportunities for farm tenants to acquire new skills through training.

Written responses

Central Bedfordshire and Luton Joint Local Access Forum – 17th July 2018

General comments were concerns in regard to the proposed policy of creating fewer, larger holdings. They questioned whether existing tenant farmers would loose out, and if the policy would defeat the concept of the holdings being available to new starters. A comment was made regarding the opportunity to acquire land in the west of the CBC area as well as the east, where the majority of land is at present. The group were positive about the proposed policy of acquiring more land, although concerned it should be for farming and not for 'profit' (and to be stated as such if this is to be the case). The group were also concerned with the impact on rights of way where land is sold, and suggest green corridors to help protect rights of way. The strategy to maximise rights of way and public open space opportunities was endorsed together with the creation of new rights of

way; providing 'missing links' and upgrading existing rights of way. Where land is developed, the opportunity should be taken to consolidate and provide additional countryside sites / nature reserves, including setting aside land for this use a number of years prior to development, allowing vegetation to mature.

Tenant Farmers' Association - 13 August 2018

This stakeholder fed back an endorsement of the local authority's review of its estate. There was support for an increase in the size of the estate and the proposal to merge units into a small number of larger and more sustainable businesses. However, the stakeholder noted that it may take longer than the proposed ten-year period to do so. The stakeholder also questioned the length of time different tenants would need to establish their businesses properly, as short tenancies provide little security for businesses looking to invest for the long term. Questions regarding the Council's potential use of Notice to Quit procedures and the Council's tenant selection criteria were also raised. The stakeholder welcomed commitment to deal with repairs and maintenance on the estate. They also supported the local authority's awareness of changes expected in agricultural policy following Brexit. Further, public access was noted as an important consideration, whereby public access must achieve a balance between rights and responsibility and tenants affected by public access must be consulted. Finally, the stakeholder recognised that the local authority should engage with farm tenants to ensure ongoing dialogue regarding issues of mutual concern, and a review of tenant representation in the local authority's decision making should take place. The TFA requested a meeting with the Council.

The Wildlife Trust - 16 August 2018

The written response from this stakeholder raised four general comments. Firstly, they encouraged the Council to use their extensive Farm Estate land around certain major settlements to influence where and what type of green space is provided. They suggested the Council use the Farm Estate as a buffer to protect biodiversity areas, provide an important ecological network and allow public access to the countryside. Secondly, this stakeholder stated that the Council should consider less tangible benefits from the land that can ensure a viable business other than residential, agricultural, food chain, rural retail and recreational facilities mentioned in the plan. Thirdly, it was recognised that the plan needs more detail regarding how it decides which land is sold, retained or acquired. The stakeholder acknowledged that some of the land in the Farms Estate provides significant environmental benefits if managed sensitively for biodiversity and heritage, so would be better served for these purposes rather than being managed solely for agricultural interests. Finally, the stakeholder welcomed the Council's recognition of its Statutory Duty for biodiversity, but suggested some key initiatives, policies and strategies have not been mentioned in the plan.

Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership - 20 August 2018

The stakeholder stated that they fully support the development of a strategic approach to Central Bedfordshire Council's Farm Estate. However, they believe that more detail is required on how such an approach will link its aims and objectives in the Environmental

Plan and a natural capital-led approach to decision making. For example, they questioned how the plan will embrace investing in environmental enhancement. They also highlighted that there should be more recognition of less tangible benefits provided by the Farm Estate, that countryside access should be included in assessing natural capital benefits, and that the Farm Estate has the potential to deliver green space and countryside access benefits as part of development. The stakeholder further considered that the Farm Estate could potentially contribute to the Council's various land-based initiatives, and suggested that the Farm Estate Strategy should refer to how it will meet the objectives of such initiatives. Suggestions regarding what Best Environmental Practice should include were also mentioned, as were concerns regarding how changes to the size/management of the Farm Estate would impact young/new entrants.

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Council - 14 August 2018

The comments fed back by this stakeholder largely concerned the potential for the Farm Estate to contribute to Green Wheels. The stakeholder welcomed the CBC's acknowledgement of how the Farm Estate can play a role in the development of Green Wheels through creating public access for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders. The stakeholder believes that the CBC should attempt to maximise public benefits of the land, whilst considering the needs of farm tenants. The stakeholder views Green Wheels as also benefiting habit creation, management and diversification. Other comments by the stakeholder included their encouragement of the CBC and its tenants to engage with the Upper & Bedford Ouse Catchment Partnership, and their encouragement of the Council to adopt a natural capital investment approach in assessing the value of its current and potential future land holdings. They cautioned against future net loss of land and believe that the benefits of a well-managed Farm Estate should be prioritised over short-term revenue generation.

Bedfordshire Branch Masonic Fishing Charity - 11 August 2018

This stakeholder's primary concern is with preserving and developing land to allow for the success and sustainability of their charity providing fishing trips and countryside experiences to children with special needs. They suggested that the Farm Estate land could be used to develop a lake to be used for their fishing activities. The stakeholder stated that controlling their own lake would reduce their overheads, and they would not require financial assistance from the CBC other than through their provision of a lake or land to develop on. They asserted that if the Farm Estate Plan is to have consideration for Disabled and Special Needs Children/Adults to be able to access the Bedfordshire countryside, their request should be considered in the plan.

Local resident from Shillington - 14 August 2018

The stakeholder welcomed the council's consultation regarding the future of farmland under their care and control. However, concerns regarding opportunities to enter the farming profession, as well as the costs of acquiring land and the ability to efficiently farm were raised. The stakeholder stated that young people need to be encouraged to carry the farming industry forwards, especially in light of the ageing farming population and

production demands and Brexit. They suggested that tenancies of a smaller farm would allow young people to enter the industry, and were concerned that the potential short term economic benefits of reducing the number of holdings would reduce opportunities for young people. Moreover, the stakeholder claimed that the proposal to buy more land at the current price of arable land would drain the council's financial resources and would disrupt diversification and sustainability.

National Farmers' Union - 19 August 2018

The response of this stakeholder to the Plan reflects their concerns regarding the future of farmers and the need to support new entrants into agriculture through the farm estate under the control of CBC. In particular, they highlighted the positive step in increasing the size of the CBC Farm Estate, as well as the excellent return on investment and asset management opportunities with strategic disposals offered by the CBC providing long-term income and investment prospects. They considered potential threats and opportunities that decreasing the number of holdings would represent to current and future tenants, as well as the need to support new entrants into farming to help tackle long-term food security concerns. Moreover, they suggested a need to consider current tenant farmers' individual circumstances when decision-making, and asserted that any plan's provisions and conditions must support profitable farming businesses and allow for diversification opportunities. Further, the stakeholder recognised that well-managed relationships will deliver value to the rural economy and community and any suitable plan should support common environmental objectives. Finally, the stakeholder claimed that small council holdings can allow tenants to earn additional income outside the holding if necessary.

Network Rail – 16 August 2018

The comments made by this stakeholder in relation to the Plan concerned railway level crossings. More specifically, the stakeholder observed that farms adjacent to railway lines include railway level crossings to provide a link to fields on opposing sides of the railway, and such crossings generally do not carry a public right of way. The stakeholder was therefore concerned that should farms under the Estates Plan be redeveloped or become open to public usage, farms with level crossings would be a safety risk. They emphasised the paramount importance of level crossing safety, and so expect further consultation in respect of developments under the Farm Estates Plan related to this issue.

The Greensand Trust – 16 August 2018

This stakeholder supports the development of a Farm Estates Plan and offers the following comments. Firstly, they requested further detail on the Plan's aim to invest in environmental enhancement, and what 'place making' means in terms of the Council's wider objectives for it. Secondly, they recognised that the UK Government's 25 Year Environmental Plan clearly supports a natural capital approach in valuing the less tangible benefits of land. The stakeholder thus hopes more information can be provided on the less tangible benefits of the CBC Farms Estate as well, and if such benefits are unknown, the Plan should investigate this. Thirdly, the stakeholder also questioned themes contained in the Plan such as access to the countryside, the Local Plan, and environmental

responsibilities. Regarding access to the countryside, the stakeholder suggested it be included in a natural capital assessment and corrected the fact that the Greensand Trust is a local, not a national body. Regarding the Local Plan, it was acknowledged that the CBC can influence sustainable development and certain information should be understandable to those without a planning background. The stakeholder also commented that the Farms Estate has certain statutory environmental responsibilities, and the Plan provides an ideal opportunity to deliver on proposals in the UK Government's 25 Year Environmental Plan.