

**Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board
7 December 2017**

Present:

Members:

Councillor Moira Gibson	Surrey Heath Borough Council (Chairman)
Councillor Brian Adams	Waverley Borough Council
Councillor Graham Chrystie	Woking Borough Council
Councillor Jonathan Glen	Hampshire County Council
Councillor Mike Goodman	Surrey County Council
Councillor David Hilton	Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead
Councillor Gail Kingerley	Runnymede Borough Council
Councillor James Radley	Hart Borough Council
Councillor Angus Ross	Wokingham Borough Council
Councillor Martin Tennant	Rushmoor Borough Council
Councillor Chris Turrell	Bracknell Forest Council

Advisory Board Members:

Ken Anckorn	Surrey Wildlife Trust
Katie Breach	Natural England
Ann Conquest	Natural England
Jennifer Wadham	Hampshire County Council (Finance)

Officers:

Julie Gil	Bracknell Forest Council
Louise Piper	Rushmoor Borough Council
Paul Druce	Surrey County Council
Jane Ireland	Surrey Heath Borough Council
Andy Glencross	Wokingham Borough Council

Apologies:

Councillor Richard Billington	Guildford Borough Council
Councillor Karen Randolph	Elmbridge Borough Council
Marc Turner	Natural England

1 Minutes of Last Meeting and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Thames Basin Heath Joint Strategic Partnership Board be agreed as a correct record subject to the following amendments:

Minute 7 Paragraph 1

The paragraph's final sentence be amended to read 'However, at least three authorities (Mole Valley, West Berkshire and Basingstoke and Dead) were potentially looking at housing within the SPA's buffer zone.'

Minute 7 Paragraph 2

The paragraph's first sentence be amended to read 'Any housing development within an SPA buffer zone should generate SAMM contributions.'

2 Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Project Update

The Board considered a report providing an update on the Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) Project. The report summarised the project's activities and achievements since the Board's last meeting and included updates on: staffing and recruitment, warden activity, SANG Visitor Surveys, access to SPA land, educational work and monitoring activities.

Staffing

It was reported that at the end of August 2017 two year round wardens had taken up posts elsewhere. A recruitment exercise had successfully filled one vacancy and the second vacancy had been backfilled by extending the contract of one seasonal warden for the remainder of the winter season. A second recruitment exercise to fill this post would run concurrently with the recruitment of seasonal wardens early in 2018.

Education was considered a key contributory factor to the SPA's success and it had been proposed that a full time education officer be appointed to provide additional support to the existing Education and Communication Co-ordinator and enable the expansion of the SAMM educational programme. It was expected that the Education Officer would receive a salary in the region of £30,000 and, if the post was approved, the recruitment process would start in July 2018.

SANG Visitor Surveys

Wardens continued to monitor visitor awareness of the SPA. To facilitate the collection and analysis of data and information gathered from visitor surveys six tablet devices had been purchased and work was underway to develop the 2018 visitor surveys.

Access to SPA Land

New access agreements with Surrey Heath Borough Council, Surrey Wildlife Trust and Horsell Common Preservation Society had been signed. The new agreements extended access arrangements for the full lifetime of the Natural England hosting period and meant that all access agreements were now aligned with the same end date.

Work to negotiate an access agreement with the Ministry of Defence had progressed well. The draft agreement was aligned with national objectives and agreements and was expected to be signed on the 9th January 2018.

Communications, Promotions and Events

Work to review and expand the content of the Thames Basin Heaths Partnership website was underway. Additional content including a calendar of events, downloadable resources and links to the volunteering pages of partner websites would be available from early 2018.

The Greenspace on Your Doorstep booklet continued to be popular and a new print run of 2000 booklets had been delivered for distribution and work was underway to review and update its content.

The 2016 Guided Walks Trial was expanded successfully to include walks in Riverside Nature Reserve, Larks Hill, Chantry Wood, Buckhurst Meadows and Brookwood Country Park. Social media had been actively used during Keep Britain Tidy's Love Parks week promote sites across the Thames Basin Heath area.

The Communication and Education Officer had led three school visits for primary schools in the Crowthorne area. The pupils had participated in an interactive classroom session and had then been taken on a field trip to learn about the heathland habitat and the species that it supported. The visits had been well received and it was hoped that these visits would continue.

SANGS Monitoring

In order to better understand visitor numbers so that promotion and monitoring work could be improved it was requested that all local authorities reintroduce the practice of recording SANGS data for their own areas. The SANG Project Manager would then collate the information gathered into a single annual report on the Strategy. If the proposal was approved, local authority officers would be formally tasked with collecting this data at a meeting in early January 2018. The data collected would then be used to inform the SAMM project of any new summer SANG surveys that needed to be carried out and allow for more accurate budgeting.

Arising from Members' questions and comments the following points were noted:

- It was requested that future reports set out warden activity by site.
- Commercial dog walkers using the SPA was a growing concern and wardens were working to build up relationships with this group and private individuals walking large numbers of dogs to encourage responsible dog ownership
- Wardens currently engaged informally with visitors to the SAPA however work was taking place to improve the quality of these interactions.
- The Partnership was supportive of the desire to increase the educational remit of the SAMM project however it was agreed that more detail of the proposed new Education Officer post was required before a formal decision could be made on whether to proceed with the appointment.
- It was agreed that an update on the impact of digital marketing and awareness raising activities would be provided at the Board's next meeting.

RESOLVED that;

- i. The contents of the Strategic Access Management and Monitoring project report be noted.
- ii. The SANGS data collection exercise, as set out in the report's annex, be approved.
- iii. A decision on the recruitment of an Education Officer be deferred to the Board's next meeting to enable more information about the post's terms of reference and governance arrangements to be provided.

3 Proposed M25/M3 Wisley Interchange Improvements

The Board was given an update on Highway England's proposals to improve the M3/M25 road interchange at Wisley.

It was reported that Highway England's preferred option was Option 14: an elongated roundabout with dedicated left turn lanes, and this would form part of the public consultation period that would commence in early 2018. Once the consultation period had closed the final proposals would be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for approval for a decision in 2019. It was expected that, if approved, construction would start in 2020 and take approximately 24 months.

Natural England would be participating fully in the next stage of the planning process when all the necessary and detailed mitigation work and enhancement measures that would be required would be considered. It was agreed that Natural England would be asked to share their response to the consultation with the Board.

If approved Option 14 would result in the loss of 8 hectares of SPA land. In addition it was expected that there would be an impact on local air quality however this could be offset by the improved traffic flow.

It was acknowledged that whilst the improvements would help in the short term, modelling had shown that the interchange would reach capacity by approximately 2030.

RESOLVED that:

- i. the M3/M25 Interchange improvements be added as a standing agenda item to future meetings of the Joint Strategic Partnership Board.
- ii. Natural England be asked to share their response to the consultation with the Board

4 Financial Report

The Joint Strategic Partnership Board considered a report setting out the financial position of the Thames Basin Heaths Strategic Access Management and Monitoring project. The report included details of the project's current financial position as well as a projected financial position for the three years to 31 March 2020.

It was reported that as at 31 March 2017, the Endowment Fund stood at £4.387million and a further £797,868 was held in the maintenance fund to pay for project expenditure. It was projected that a further £2.057million would be added to the Endowment Account during the 2017/18 financial year giving an anticipated year-end total of £6.444million.

The Board was informed that the projected income for the 2017/18 financial year was significantly higher than had been predicted at the Board's previous meeting, £2.939million compared to £1.614million, due to increased income projections for Hart District Council and Woking Borough Councils.

The projected costs had increased by £4,000 to £451,000 since the previous outturn. This increase included a £20,000 increase in staffing costs caused by pay inflation, additional staff training and an increase in rent following the move to new office premises.

The Board noted the report and congratulated Natural England for consistently managing to stay within their budget whilst meeting the Committee's expectations.

5 Investment

The Board held a discussion on the best way to develop an investment strategy to ensure that the best returns were obtained from the money held by the Partnership.

It was acknowledged that the Committee would need to obtain independent financial advice before any investment decisions were made. It would also be necessary to develop both short and long term investment objectives and parameters to ensure that a coherent investment strategy was maintained. It was agreed that a small working party would draft short and long term investment objectives and these would be circulated to members for approval before the Board's next meeting.

RESOLVED that:

- i. The Local Government Association be approached for advice on the most appropriate procedure to follow in order to obtain independent financial advice.
- ii. Councillor Glen, Councillor Goodman and Councillor Hilton to meet with Jennifer Wadham to develop draft investment objectives.

6 Any Other Business

Wealdon Judgment

The Group expressed disappointment at the lack of information from Natural England concerning the recent Wealdon Judgement.

In view of the fact that a number of the local authorities would be submitting their Local Plans to the Planning Inspectorate in the first half of 2018 and the judgment could have implications for these plans it was agreed that a preliminary briefing would be sought from Natural England on the matter as a matter of urgency and a full report would be requested for the Board's next meeting.

Local Plans

It was reported that during Local Plan consultation periods, Natural England had been submitting objections based on local authorities being unable to demonstrate sufficient SANGS for a ten to fifteen year period. This stance was at odds with recent rulings from the Planning Inspectorate which took the view that a lack of identified SANG capacity should not be considered as being a showstopper. It was agreed that Natural England would be asked to provide an update on their approach to Local Plans and future provision of SANGs at the Board's next meeting.

7 Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting of the Thames Basin Heath Joint Strategic Partnership Board would take place in February 2018.