

Notes of a Meeting of the Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board - 27 November 2015

Present:

Board Members

Cllr Michael Brossard	Bracknell Forest Borough Council
Cllr Graham Cundy	Woking Borough Council
Cllr Roland Dibbs	Rushmoor Borough Council
Cllr Chris Elmer	Elmbridge Borough Council
Cllr John Furey	Surrey County Council
Cllr David Hilton	Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
Cllr Moira Gibson	Surrey Heath Borough Council (Chairman,)
Cllr Jonathan Glen	Hampshire County Council
Cllr Mike Goodman	Surrey County Council
Cllr Peter Isherwood	Waverley Borough Council
Cllr Gail Kingerley	Runnymede Borough Council
Cllr James Radley	Hart District Council
Cllr Angus Ross	Wokingham Borough Council

Advisory Board Members

Ken Ancorn	Surrey Wildlife Trust
Mary Tomlinson	Natural England
Jennifer Wadham	Hampshire County Council (Finance)
Simon Thompson	SAMM Project
Matt Jackson	Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust
Heather Richards	RSPB

Officers/Observers

Ernest Amoako	Woking Borough Council
Paul Druce	Surrey County Council
Richard Ford	Runnymede Borough Council
Julie Gil	Bracknell Forest Council
Phillip Gill	Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
Andy Glencross	Wokingham Borough Council
Jane Ireland	Surrey Heath Borough Council
Judith Jenkins	Elmbridge Borough Council
Dan Knowles	Guildford Borough Council
Louise Piper	Rushmoor Borough Council
Gareth Williams	Waverley Borough

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Guildford Borough Council, Cllr Chris Turrell Bracknell Forest Borough Council (Cllr Michael Brossard attend as substitute).

2 Minutes of Previous Meeting and Matters Arising

Cllr John Furey drew attention to the proposal referred to in Paragraph 4.6, which had been proposed, seconded and agreed, but had not been reflected in the decisions made in the resolution.

In addition Cllr Furey referred to Paragraph 5.2 which indicated that Natural England would circulate an updated note on CIL to the Partnership. Whilst he acknowledged that there was a report on the agenda, he considered that it was important for the Partnership, as part of that report, to understand what was outstanding and what was likely to be coming forward.

Resolved that the minutes of the previous meeting, held on 25 February 2015, be agreed subject to

- (a) the addition to Paragraph 4.9 as follows:**
 - v) 10 seasonal wardens be recruited for 2016/17 and 2017/18 and the prospective expenditure to be met from the Endowment Fund.**
- (b) An updated note on CIL be circulated to the Partnership via the Chairman and the Thames Basin Heath Officers.**

3 Financial Report

Jenny Wadham, Principal Accountant at Hampshire presented an update report on the financial position of the Thames Basin Heaths Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM).

As at 31 March 2015, the Endowment Account balance had stood at £1.820m, and an additional £430,340 had been held in the Maintenance Account to pay for project expenditure. It had been projected that a further £790,000 would be added to the Endowment Account in the 2015/16 financial year, giving an anticipated total of £2.610m available to be invested. Based on current projections of income and expenditure, the balance on the Endowment Account would increase to £4.780m by 31 March 2018.

The total income received by the Administrative Body to 31 March 2015 had been £2.911m, set against amounts paid out to cover costs of £660,338. The actual tariff income received in the year to 31 March 2015 had been £1.402m, which had been significantly higher than the forecast income.

The Partnership received details of the actual project costs for 2014/15, and a detailed breakdown of the projected project costs for future years.

Full information on the projections for the 2015/16 financial year and budgets and plans for 2016/17 onwards would be covered in the update from Natural England. However overall it was projected that approximately £790,000 would be added to the Endowment Fund. The projected costs for 2015/16 equated to 27% of the total tariff income, and a net increase to the Maintenance Account balance of just under £33,000 was projected. In the SAMM business plan it had been envisaged that approximately £1.6m annual tariff income would be required, to meet the ongoing annual expenditure costs, whilst allowing for 70% of total income to be transferred to the Endowment Fund, to ensure the

sustainability of the SAMM in perpetuity. It was noted that the projected tariff income for the 2016/17 and 2017/18 financial years was approximately £1.4m and £1.7m respectively.

The annual expenditure projections on an ongoing basis were approximately £427,000, following planned recruitment to four full time and ten seasonal wardens by March 2016, as agreed by the JSPB at the meeting on 18th December 2013. The ongoing annual expenditure projections were slightly lower than the level originally anticipated in the SAMM business plan of approximately £500,000 per annum, primarily because the full allocation of wardens had not been met. The four full time wardens were now in post, and the full ten seasonal wardens were planned to be in post for 2016/17.

The JSPB was reminded that under the terms of the SAMM agreement it had responsibility to review the value and performance of the Endowment Account on a regular basis. The agreement also envisaged that the management of the funds in the Endowment Account would be undertaken by an Independent Financial Advisor.

As a result the JSPB was asked to provide direction as to how and from whom the services of an independent financial advisor were to be procured in order to maximise the return achieved. It was noted that fund balances were currently held by the Administrative Body, receiving interest at a rate of 0.5%, the current Bank of England base rate.

The JSPB discussed the need to obtain a better return on the funds in the Endowment Account and the approach to appointing an independent financial advisor, as Hampshire County Council was unable to provide this advice. It was proposed that preliminary work be undertaken in relation to the appointment of an independent financial advisor and the results reported to an additional meeting if necessary. Members also requested clarification on the Terms of Reference and contractual arrangements of the JSPB.

Resolved that

- (a) the current financial position and projected financial position for the three financial years to 31 March 2018 be noted;**
- (b) the transfer of any unused Maintenance Account balance to the Endowment Account was considered;**
- (c) the investment strategy for the Endowment Account fund was considered;**
- (d) Hampshire County Council be asked to undertake preliminary work in relation to the appointment of an independent financial advisor;**
- (e) if necessary, an additional meeting be arranged to consider the appointment of an independent financial advisor; and**
- (f) information on the Terms of Reference and contractual arrangements be circulated to Members.**

4 Annual Monitoring Report

The JSPB received a spreadsheet setting out the annual monitoring information from the authorities. It was noted that, of the planning appeals impacted by the SPA, very few had

been refused on SPA grounds alone as generally there mitigation measures were in place.

5 SAMM Update

Simon Thompson reported that the project was currently fully staffed, with 4.4 FTE Wardens, an Education and Communication Officer, and Project Manager. As the necessary approvals for the recruitment of the ten seasonal wardens were now in place, it was anticipated they would be in post by March 2016. Three of the posts would be hosted externally, by Hampshire County Council, Surrey Wildlife Trust and Horsell Common Preservation Society, under a grant funding agreement with Natural England. The remaining seven would be employed directly by Natural England as short-term appointments.

The project was currently looking at options for alternative accommodation which would be suitable for the number of staff the project would have in 2016. DEFRA approval to rent a non-DEFRA estate office had been granted in principle, and discussions with a number of organisations regarding potential accommodation were proceeding. Further information would be provided to Members at the next meeting.

The Wardens and the Education and Communication Officer have met with each of the land managers of the particular areas of the SPA to highlight the locations on the site with highest visitor pressures, and agree any specific messages they wish the wardens to impart, prior to the commencement of wardening. Agreements for access licenses were, either in place or being finalised with a number of organisations. In all cases, other than the Crown Estate, it was expected that licenses would be in place ahead of the 2016 bird breeding season.

The warden output per month over the 2015 breeding bird season had been 295 on-site warden hours, 1110 people engaged and 176 leaflets issued. These figures were averages for the period from July to September inclusive, which was the period during which the warden team had been at full strength.

The Education and Communication Officer had focussed on communications for this first year as it was felt that it was very important to get the project identity established and to maximise public awareness of the project. The Education and Communication Officer, and the Wardens had also undertaken a programme of visits to all of the SANGs in the Thames Basin Heaths area. This programme included written details and photographs for each site which would be used to produce a SANGs directory and a series of SANGs leaflets, as well as be published on the internet.

It was reported that DEFRA rules effectively prevented the Natural England from having a website as it allowed a zero spend for this purpose. However Horsell Common Preservation Society had offered to host a website on behalf of the project. This was still in the early stages of development but should be on-line by the end of March. It was intended that the site be used to promote the project's key messages and also to promote all the SANGs sites. It was intended that whilst the site was technically hosted alongside the Horsell Common Preservation Society site, it would have its own distinctive identity and contain links to the relevant pages on all the authorities websites. The project had also launched a Facebook page and a Twitter feed which were updated daily.

Project partners had identified that commercial dog walkers were a significant cause of disturbance on the SPA, this had been reinforced by the experiences of the SAMM wardens. The SAMM project was therefore coordinating an SPA wide approach to the licensing of commercial dog walkers. A licensing pilot was being planned, with the Crown

Estate and Horsell Common Preservation Society due to trial the approach from Spring 2016.

The licence would cover all land holdings of the licensing organisations, including SPA, SANGs and other nonspecific open space. Concerns about legitimising dog walking on the SPA were raised. It was reported that this had been the subject of much discussion but that the majority view had been these activities were already going on on the SPA without control or guidance and it had been felt therefore that a licence together with a Code of Conduct which limited the maximum number of dogs an individual could have would be much better than currently, although it was except that licensing an activity on the SPA had inherent risks.

Doubts were also expressed in relation to how the licence conditions would be enforced and how the penalties would be applied. It was recognised that the effect of licensing commercial dog walkers was unknown and could require additional resources to enforce the licence conditions. However it was recognised that the potential effects of licensing commercial dog walkers would be evaluated as part of the trial.

With regard to the bird numbers, the monitoring report for this year had not been yet been received and would present to the next meeting. Last year's report showed that there was a healthy increase in the bird population across the SPA. Early indications of the data for this year showed a continuing increase generally. It was acknowledged that protection of the Habitats was the main concern of the JSPB rather than fluctuations in bird numbers.

The automatic people counter sensors had now been installed on all land, except Ministry of Defence. The project was currently in advanced discussion with the Ministry of Defence and it was expected that the remaining sensors would be installed by March 2016. Throughout 2015 the project had been calibrating and resolving various unexpected issues with the sensors. All problems had now been resolved ahead of the 2016 bird breeding season and a complete data set for next year would therefore be available.

The SAMM project had now reached a staffing level to enable car park counts to be undertaken in-house. This would facilitate a move to a more robust methodology of undertaking one set of transects on a monthly basis. It was recognised that car park counts only provided data on the number of visitors who travelled to the SPAs by car. However it was comparatively cheap to collect the data which would provide information on trends on visitation rates over time.

It was suggested that the proposed website should contain information showing footpaths links to the SANGS to encourage visitors to use the SANGS as part of a longer walk. It was also suggested that, with the permission of the landowners, notices could be displayed at the SPAs directing visitors to the nearest SANG or other non designated open space. It was also proposed to provide the wardens with leaflets to distribute to SPA visitors identifying the nearest SANGs.

It considered that the content of the website should be agreed following consideration by the JSPB. Natural England agreed to provide a report to the next meeting on the detailed content of the website provide this did not result in delays to the launch.

The expected SAMM project expenditure for the 2015/16 and 2016/17 year were received. It was noted that salary costs had been based on June 2014 Natural England pay scales and so were likely to increase in line with future pay agreements. It was noted that Non Pay Running costs in both table should read Travel and Subsistence and Non Pay Running costs.

Indicative SAMM project activity for the next six months was detailed and set out the main delivery elements of the project over this period.

Resolved that

- (i) the SAMM project update be noted;**
- (ii) Natural England be asked to provide a report on the detailed content of the project's website to be hosted by the Horsell Common Preservation Society and that this report be considered at the additional meeting referred to in Paragraph 3.10 above**

6 Interim Review of Suitable Alternative Greenspace in the Thames Basin Heaths

Natural England presented a paper which set out a summary of the findings and recommendations of the Interim Review of Suitable Alternative Greenspace in the Thames Basin Heaths.

The meeting was reminded that the methodology for the review had been presented to the JSPB Members in February 2015, and Footprint Ecology had been commissioned to undertake the review. The draft report had been completed in June 2015 and following a consultation period, a significant response had been received with detailed comments received from the majority of local planning authorities and many of the project partners.

The main findings of the report were:

- Data available from 27 SANGs suggested they were absorbing a high level of use, but that it was not possible to be sure if those people would otherwise visit the SPA.
- There was no clear evidence that SANGs use had either increased or decreased over time.
- Ratio of dogs per person on SANGs was broadly similar to that on the SPA.
- Approximately 75% of SPA visitors arrived by car, which was replicated by some SANGs
- Eight SANGs had at least 90% of visits lasting less than an hour (compared to 64% on SPA).
- Across SANGs as a whole there was little difference in visit frequency compared to the SPA, but some sites had particularly high numbers of daily visitors.
- A number of SANGs had relatively high proportion of visitors also using SPA.
- Route lengths on SANGs were significantly shorter than on the SPA, suggesting SANGs were not necessarily providing the kind of routes visitors were using on the SPA.
- Postcode data showed that the SPA drew people from further afield than SANGs, and that in general larger SANGs drew visitors from a wider area.
- Total SANGs area was equivalent to 11% of the SPA (8% discounted).
- Promotion of SANGs on the web was poor.
- The modelled draw of SANGs and the SPA (based on nearest parking) indicated that SANGs and SPA overlapped well.
- Gaps in current SANGs provision appeared to be between Farnborough and Woking, the northern half of Guildford and towards the west of the SPA.
- The distribution of developments for which SANGs had been provided suggested that there were areas where the development appeared too far from the SANGs.

The main recommendations in the report were as follows:

- Future focus should be on larger SANGs.
- The path networks beyond SANGs boundaries needed to be secured and maintained.
- Promotion of SANGs on the internet needed to be improved.
- SANGs guidelines needed to be clearer on how to estimate additional capacity on sites with existing access.
- Guidelines for surveys for SANGs sites should be clear on frequency and methodology.
- Provision of long routes was important.
- All parts of walks should be available to dogs off leads
- The need for standardisation in the way LPAs recorded developments linked to SANGs.
- Recognition that it was likely that the effectiveness of SANGs would increase over time with access management warding and better promotion of SANGs..

It was noted that the SANGs approach was still relatively new, and many of the SANGs sites had been still in the process of development when the visitor surveys had been undertaken. This alongside the fact that the SAMM project had not commenced wardening of the SPA at the time of the surveys, meant that the findings were likely to have understated the potential longer term success of the sites under review.

The JSPB received a report from officers which set out in detail the comments and concerns not addressed by the revisions to the report. The report had been re-titled 'An Interim Review of SANGs in the Thames Basin Heaths' in recognition that the evidence base was not yet robust enough to draw definite conclusions over the success of the approach.

The Thames Basin Heaths' SPA affected authorities had concerns with respect to the credibility of the Footprint Ecology report into the effectiveness of SANGs. In particular it was considered that the evidence relied on and the methodology and approach was inadequate, imprecise and insufficient to enable a robust outcome in respect of the objectives of the study.

Throughout the report there were a significant number of (unsupported) assumptions, assertions and sweeping conclusions. It was not, therefore, considered to be a robust assessment of the effectiveness of SANGs. If published in its latest draft form, it could undermine the current approach that was in place through the use of Avoidance and Mitigation Strategies at local authority level.

In the light of this, the affected authorities did not wish to see the report published in its current form. It was noted that the provision of SANGs was only one part of a package of measures designed to mitigate the impact of net new residential development on the Thames Basin Heath SPA. Other measures such as Strategic Access Management and Monitoring had not been considered in the report.

The JSPB was reminded that the principal reason for mitigation works was the protection of the SPA. However the report had inferred that there should be a separate green infrastructure which went beyond the purpose of SANGs as an alternative to the SPA.

The overriding concern were the limited number of SANGs which had been surveyed, the out dated survey data used and the increase in size of the SANGs and the length of the walks which were intended to replicate the use of the SPA. However SANGs were not intended to replicate SPAs but to provide an alternative.

Members considered the following options

- Option 1: To agree the report and publish it in its current form.
- Option 2: The report be published as currently written, but a forward be added to explain the context, in terms of limited evidence, and the early stage of SANGs deployment and that it was only intended to provide an early indication of successes and areas for improvement for future sites.
- Option 3: Footprint Ecology be re-commissioned to re-write the report (using the existing data).
- Option 4: The report to remain un-published and be used as an internal report for the JSPB.

In addition to the concerns raised by officers, Members considered that the report lacked input from the elected Members and had the potential to undermine the strategy for the protection of the SPAs.

It was proposed that in accordance with Option 4, the report to remain unpublished but that it be used as the basis for further work by a Task and Finish Group with the aim of reporting back to the JSPB on its findings for the future use of the report.

Resolved that

- (i) **the report of the Interim Review of Suitable Alternative Greenspace in the Thames Basin Heaths by Footprint Ecology to remain unpublished;**
- (ii) **a Task and Finish Group be established to consider the report and its future application;**
- (iii) **the Task and Finish Group be asked to report back to the JSPB within 4 months; and**
- (iv) **the Task and Finish Group to comprise**

**Cllr Angus Ross (Wokingham Borough Council)
Cllr Mike Goodman (Surrey County Council)
Cllr James Radley (Hart District Council),
Cllr Moira Gibson (ex officio) (Surrey Heath Borough Council)
Simon Thompson (SAMM Project)
2 Officers (to be identified)**

7 Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that, as agreed in Paragraph 3.10 above, it was likely that an additional meeting would be required before the scheduled meeting due in six months' time. Dates would be notified to Members.