

## Minutes of a Meeting of the Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board 17 June 2021

**Present:** Councillor Jan Harwood, Guildford Borough Council (Chairman)  
Councillor Martin D'Arcy, Waverley Borough Council  
Councillor Jonathan Glen, Hampshire County Council  
Councillor Marisa Heath, Surrey County Council  
Councillor David Hilton, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead  
Councillor Marina Munro, Rushmoor Borough Council  
Councillor James Radley, Hart Borough Council  
Councillor Angus Ross, Wokingham Borough Council

**In Attendance:** Sarah Bunce, Natural England  
Ann Conquest Natural England  
Simon Cridland, Bracknell Forest Borough Council  
Daria Dadum, Natural England  
Paul Druce, Surrey County Council  
Matthew Ellis, Waverley Borough Council  
Duncan Fisher  
Julie Gil, Bracknell Forest Borough Council  
Daniel Hawes, Hart Borough Council  
Tom Haywood, BBOWT  
Dan Knowles, Guildford Borough Council  
Heather Lewis, Surrey Wildlife Trust  
Anna Lucas, Hart, Rushmoor and Surrey Heath SPA Mitigation Project  
Jane Reeves, Surrey Heath Borough Council  
Stephen Rudd,  
Ruth Shelton, Natural England  
Jack Thompson  
Jennifer Wadham, Hampshire County Council

**Apologies:** Councillor Gary Elson, Woking Borough Council  
Councillor Karen Randolph, Elmbridge Borough Council  
Councillor Chris Turrell, Bracknell Forest Borough Council

**Observers:** Councillor Jerry Hyman, Waverley Borough Council

### **1 Minutes of Previous Meeting**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Thames Basin Heaths (TBH) Joint Strategic Partnership Board (JSPB) held on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2020 be approved as a correct record.

### **2 Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Project Update**

Ruth Shelton, Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) Project Manager, Natural England, gave a presentation in respect of the work taking place as part of the SAMM project. The presentation summarised the project team's activities since the Board's last meeting and included updates on staffing, warden activity, educational work and monitoring activity.

It was reported that of the six new seasonal wardens who had started with the SAMM project on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2021 all had successfully completed their induction period and were making an excellent contribution to the SAMM team's work. Two year round wardens had been promoted, one had internally within Natural England and a second having moved to Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust. In order to fill the gaps in the year round team left by these promotions and provide both an element of functional support to the management team as well as opportunities for career progression to the wider team, it was proposed that one of the vacant year round warden posts be transformed into a Senior Warden.

Although the creation of this new team structure would result in an increase in salary costs these would be mitigated by reducing the number of seasonal wardens recruited each year from seven to six. A situation which would reflect the situation on the ground in 2020 and 2021 when it had been possible to recruit only six seasonal wardens.

It was reported that Covid continued to impact on the work of the wardening team and current season of wardening would be delayed and run from 15<sup>th</sup> March until 14<sup>th</sup> September 2021. Whilst the overall number of wardening hours completed since the last JSPB's last meeting had been less than the same period in 2019; in April 2021, the first full month when wardens could resume activities, 615 hours of wardening activity had been completed compared to 592 hours in April 2019.

Scannable QR codes had been introduced on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2021 and wardens were able to use these to provide visitors to the SANGs with additional information about the area they were in without the need to hand out leaflets. It was hoped that as restrictions eased further wardens would be able to reintroduce guided walks and sessions for schools and community groups.

Work to enhance the Partnership's website and improve the digital content and printed materials had taken place over the winter and the SANG directory booklet had been refreshed and updated with new art work which would become the 'branding' for the TBH Special Protection Area.

The SAMM project's educational offer had moved online with the delivery of fully interactive online sessions on a range of subjects including an introduction to the heathland and its wildlife and the threats faced by these habitats and what children might do to help protect the landscapes. These online sessions are then supplemented with follow up work for children to complete in class. A dedicated education page had been added to the TBH website which provides guidance, downloadable resources and activities which can be used to enhance learning and links had been made to encourage participation in a Citizen Science Project to capture sightings of the Silver Studded Blue Butterflies. As restrictions eased, face to face outdoor sessions will be resumed in late June and bookings were now being taken.

In December 2020, the SAMM team launched the annual SANGs visitor survey. In order to meet government restrictions the survey was conducted through the use of QR codes. Up to the end of May 2021, a total of 575 replies had been received with Chantry Wood being the most visited SANG (38 responses), this was followed by Riverside NR (34 responses) and Timber Hill and Ottersaw Chase (31 responses). The main activity being recorded on the SANG was dog walking (271 responses), walking (188 responses) and family outings (66 answers) with the majority of visits lasting between 30 minutes to an hour (317 responses).

The use of QR codes had enabled the visitor survey to take in a larger number of SANGS than in previous years (44 in 2020 compared to 7 in 2013) and gather a larger number of

responses than had been possible with face to face surveys (575 responses compared to 216 in 2013).

It was questioned whether the pandemic was impacting on the distances that people were willing to travel to reach an area of green space and whether any changes were a temporary anomaly or part of a growing long term trend. It was agreed that this would be explored as part of future surveys.

**RESOLVED** that the staff structure changes proposed in paragraph 1.7 of the report be approved.

### **3 Hart, Rushmoor and Surrey Heath Special Protection Area Mitigation Project Update**

The Board received a report setting out the findings of a joint project between Hart, Rushmoor and Surrey Heath Borough Councils to explore alternative and complementary avoidance and mitigation measures which could be used to reduce the impact of developments on Special Protection Areas.

As a single Housing Market Area (HMA), Hart, Rushmoor and Surrey Heath Borough Councils had over the years worked together to deliver access to cross boundary SANG solutions. However the opportunities for delivering SANG were reducing and it was felt that the current approach to avoidance and mitigation would result in significant difficulties in delivering net new residential development in parts of the HMA in coming years.

The joint project aimed to provide a robust evidence base that could be used to demonstrate whether an alternative strategy could be put in place in the scenario where no further SANG could be identified in a particular local authority area. The project had identified four potential options and within these a range of actions that might be taken:

- Option 1 Alternative Green Spaces
  - SANG networks
  - Linear SANG
  - Enhancement or Creation of Recreational Routes
  - Smaller SANG/facilities with Smaller Catchments
  - Larger SANG with Larger Catchments
- Option 2 – Habitat Management and Restoration
  - Habitat Management/Restoration
- Option 3 – Access Management
  - Expansion of SAMM Project - Wardening service
  - Expansion of SAMM Project – Education and Communication service
- Option 4 – Access Restriction and Control
  - Car Parking Availability/Access
  - Dog Control
  - Access Restriction

Each option was then assessed for its effectiveness of mitigating the impacts of any development and the deliverability of the mitigation measures proposed. From this exercise it was considered that SANG networks, linear SANGs and small SANGs if part of

a SANG network had the potential to mitigate against developments if they were considered as part of a package with the SAMM project.

It was stressed that the assessment was a technical piece of work which should not be considered in isolation and planning authorities would need to consider the findings alongside its statutory planning obligations. Furthermore weight should continue to be given to SANG which meets the existing criteria in the first instance and it would still be necessary to demonstrate that the mitigating options were as effective as the existing SANG criteria.

It was stressed that any proposals for small areas of SANG would need to demonstrate physical connections to other areas of SANG for example through a SANG network or an addition to an existing SANG.

The Hawley area was known to attract mountain bikers, many of whom would travel; long distances to reach a suitable area to ride in. The references to car parking at SANGs was noted. It was agreed that consideration would be given to any opportunities to expand facilities for cyclists.

The Group commended the report and the positive evidence baseline that it provided to support the benefits of the principles behind SANGS.

#### **4 Financial Update**

The Board received a report setting out the current financial position of the Thames Basin Heaths Strategic Access and Monitoring Project.

It was noted that as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 the balance in the Endowment Fund was £14.869million of which £10.101million was held in investments, £730,000 held as dividend income to be reinvested and the remaining £4.038million arising from tariff income and bank interest held as a cash balance by Hampshire County Council in their position as the Administrative Body. Of the £4.768million held as cash, £3.2million had been approved for investment by the Board and £1.5million was held as a cash balance in the Maintenance Fund to pay for project expenditure.

By the end of the 2021/22 financial year it was projected that £3.2million would be received from partner authorities in the form of tariff income with further tariff income of £1.9million and £1.5million being received in 2022/23 and 2023/24 respectively.

The Board noted the contents of the report.

#### **5 Investment Working Group Update**

The Board received a report providing an update from the Investment Working Group.

Following the Board's meeting in November 2020, the Working Group had reviewed paragraph seven of the Investment Strategy to better reflect the Board's view that investments should as far as possible be made in areas which did not have an undue negative impact on the environment. To further clarify the Board's intentions a Responsible Investing Policy had been drafted which would be appended to the Investment Strategy.

The Board was informed that the Responsible Investing Policy had been developed using the Berkshire Pension Fund's Responsible Investment Policy and Hampshire County

Council's Investment Policy as templates combined with input from Arlingclose, the Board's financial advisors, to ensure that the policy was workable.

It was agreed that the priority relating to climate change would be reviewed and the wording strengthened.

Concern about use of the wording 'Where possible', in Section 3: Priorities of the Responsible Investing Policy, in reference to reducing investments in products which did not align with the primary purpose of the Thames Basin Heaths JSPB's aims and objectives was noted. It was stressed that the phrase 'Where possible' was common terminology in investment strategies and was used to ensure that they did not become restrictive and so that investments did not have to be sold immediately at a potential loss should a fund decide to invest in an area that did not align with stated priorities. The Board was reminded that the TBH JSPB was a small scale investor and as such had limited leverage when dealing with Fund Managers.

It was requested that any further comments be forwarded to Jenny Wadham.

## **6 Exclusion of Public and Press**

**RESOLVED** that the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of Item 8, Financial Advisor's presentation, as it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information relating to the financial and business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 the Schedule 12A the Local Government Act 1972.

## **7 Financial Advisor's Presentation**

Greg Readings, Arlingclose, gave a presentation in respect of the performance of the investments made by the Board to ensure the long term financial security of the SAMM project.

The Board was informed that 2020 had been a particularly challenging year for all investors as interest rates were cut and companies either paused, cut or cancelled dividend payments. Notwithstanding this most asset values had improved since the pandemic's onset and income levels had held up reasonably well, although at a lower rate than would have been likely otherwise.

The Board was reminded that to date, a total of £10.2million had been invested on their behalf and a further £3.2million was scheduled for investment in the current financial year. In line, with the Board's agreed Investment Strategy the primary aim of any investments made was to generate income as opposed to capital growth and any investments made should have the lowest risk possible with any investments being made for the long term. To date, the Board's investments had resulted in a total dividend of £818,968 a figure that represented a 4.99% annualised return on the original investment, with £344,797 of these dividends being realised in the 2020/21 financial year.

The Board noted the update.

## **8 Any Other Business**

The Group was informed that Ann Conquest would be leaving the SAMM project to take up a new position within Natural England at the end of June. The Partnership thanked

Ann for all her work to support the SAMM project over the years and wished her well for the future.