

THAMES BASIN HEATHS
JOINT STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BOARD

Date: 11th September 2018

Subject: SMM Project update

Report of: Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SMM) Project

Recommendations:

- To NOTE the contents of the report on SMM project activity

Purpose of the Report:

To provide the JSPB with an update on SMM project activity since the last meeting in April 2018.

1. SMM project staffing and recruitment

Seasonal wardens

- 1.1 Two of the seasonal wardens left the project early in July. The remaining 5 wardens completed their full contract.

Year round wardens

- 1.2 The comms and education officer, Katie Breach, left the project at the end of April. Since that time, the senior warden, Sarah Bunce, has been partially backfilling this role. The project manager, Ann Conquest, has been supporting Sarah with her duties. Katie's departure has provided the opportunity to look at responsibilities within the project and re-organize responsibilities to maximize skills and efficiency. A new senior warden, Annie Osborn, has been recruited to work with Sarah, to replace Katie. They will split the comms/senior warden role; Sarah will take the lead on comms. and Annie will take the lead on the functional management of the team, but they will work together closely to deliver the two roles jointly, particularly during the summer when the team expands to around 15 staff. The new education and engagement officer will take the lead on the curriculum based education side of the project. The recruitment for the education officer is live on the civil service jobs website, with a closing date of 20th September and interviews on 27th September.
- 1.3 One of the year round wardens left the project at the end of August to take up a new role with Bird Aware Solent. This left the project with one part time and one full time year-round warden vacancies (one had been partially filled over the summer by a staff member

increasing her hours). These are currently live on the civil service website with a closing date of 23rd September and interviews on 1st October.

2. Wardening and Delivery

2.1 The project normally provides a warden service on the SPA seven days a week from 07:00 to 19:00 (daylight hours permitting).

SPA Wardening

2.2 The updated warden output for the project for 2018 is set out below. The following tables set out the number of hours of warden activity delivered on the SPA during the sensitive period March – August 2018.

March	Total hours wardened	393
	Number of interactions	426
	Number already spoken to	125
	Leaflets handed out	456
	Number of dogs	441
	Number of dog walkers (5+)	6
	Average already spoken to	29.34%

April	Total hours wardened	702
	Number of interactions	1230
	Number already spoken to	385
	Leaflets handed out	1296
	Number of dogs	1206
	Number of dog walkers (5+)	27
	Average already spoken to	31.30%

May	Total hours wardened	651
	Number of interactions	1086
	Number already spoken to	314
	Leaflets handed out	1138
	Number of dogs	1044
	Number of dog walkers (5+)	23
	Average already spoken to	28.91%

June	Total hours wardened	625
	Number of interactions	1248
	Number already spoken to	347
	Leaflets handed out	1254
	Number of dogs	1038
	Number of dog walkers (5+)	15
	Average already spoken to	27.80%

July	Total hours wardened	580
	Number of interactions	976
	Number already spoken to	358
	Leaflets handed out	901
	Number of dogs	832
	Number of dog walkers (5+)	15
	Average already spoken to	36.68%

August	Total hours wardened	543
	Number of interactions	1034
	Number already spoken to	278
	Leaflets handed out	1249
	Number of dogs	811
	Number of dog walkers (5+)	17
	Average already spoken to	26.89%

2.3 The tables above show the total hours wardened, the number of interactions undertaken during those hours, the number of people already spoken to, the number of leaflets handed out, the number of dogs with the people/groups spoken to, and the number of dog walkers with five or more dogs. The number of people already spoken to, and the percentage of

total interactions which were with people already spoken to provide an indication of how many site users have been made aware of site sensitivities through previous interactions with the warden team.

- 2.4 The number of hours wardened has varied over the sensitive period this year due to a number of factors. Wardening this year has been very challenging due to the inclement weather. We began with “The Beast from the East” – heavy snow which delayed the start of the wardening season as the office was closed on 1st and 2nd March. During March, wardening hours are down due to this and several days of staff training at the beginning of the season, plus more snow at the end of the month. We had more staff training in May and some staff sickness. Then the very hot weather hit us hard in June and July: this year was the hottest summer ever recorded in England. During July and August, wardening hours are down due to the weather, staff holiday, staff sickness and early leavers. The increased number of sites that we warden and making use of project vans has also added to our logistics, which has affected hours wardened across the season, and will do going forward.
- 2.5 Number of interactions was maximised during the heatwave by wardening at either end of the day. We found that sites were very empty from around 11am onwards, particularly of dog walkers, and that staff were finding long days in the heat challenging and unproductive later in the day. We concentrated our efforts in the coolest parts of the day, when sites were busiest. We also maximised interactions by working weekends. Over 25% of start times were before 8am during June-August to try and beat the heat, and a total of 194 weekend days were worked by the team to try and maximise the number of interactions with site users in this very unusual year. The presence of travellers and the introduction of car park charging has also affected the amount of interactions on some sites.
- 2.6 The figure showing the “number of people already spoken to” provides the project with an indication of the level of saturation that has been achieved. In 2017, we found that on average around 40% of our interactions were with people that we had already spoken to. This year this is around 10% lower as the figures above show. This is likely to be because we have begun wardening the MoD sites, which have never been wardened before and have attended more events this year. This figure shows that we are reaching a new audience, which is supported by the figures for the amount of leaflets we have handed out, which is a similar number to last year, despite the above constraints on our wardening.
- 2.7 The number of dog walkers with five or more dogs is included as individuals with large numbers of dogs are likely to be commercial dog walkers, although they may just be owners who have lots of dogs.
- 2.8 To summarise, during March – August 2018 the project delivered 3492 hours of wardening, had 6000 interactions with people who had 5372 dogs and gave out 6294 leaflets.

3. Access to SPA land

- 3.1 A new access agreement has been signed with Tweseldown racecourse to warden at Tweseldown, which is adjacent to the Army land at Bourley and Long Valley. An orientation event is being arranged with the land manager for the wardening team in November.

4. SPA and SANGs Monitoring

- 4.1 A full commercial tender exercise was undertaken to make sure that this work was competitive both commercially and technically. Ecological Planning and Research (EPR) won the tender and their surveyors, from Marketing Means, have now completed the survey, conducting over 900 interviews at 30 access points across the SPA during the summer holidays. One access point – roundabout car park at Chobham Common, has been undersurveyed due to 2 traveler incursions and a final attempt to survey this point is scheduled on the weekend of 15th/16th September once the travelers have been moved on.
- 4.2 The summer SANG surveys were deferred until next year allowing more time to ensure the right sites are surveyed and to make this work more cost effective.
- 4.3 We have continued to complete our car park transect surveys and people counter monitoring. Footprint Ecology have just been commissioned to analyse the 2017 data.

5. Partnership working

- 5.1 Wildfire has been a big problem on the SPA this year due to the hot, dry conditions. On 25th June the longest consecutive amber wildfire warning was given after 4 days. This continued well into July due to the heatwave. Ash Ranges, Chobham Common, Whitmoor common, Yateley Common, Horsell Common and Sheets Heath all suffered from fires, some of them several times. This not only created a big hazard to people and property, damaged the habitat but has also taken up a huge amount of firefighting resource. We have worked very closely with the fire brigade to respond to these events and their aftermath, reporting fires early, keeping the public safe and reporting any remaining hotspots following fires. We have also supported the fire service by sharing their posts and having wildfire targeted posts on social media and our website. One of our events during Heath Week was supported by the Hampshire Fire service and was well received by the public.
- 5.2 We have worked closely with the Forestry Commission to draft signage on their sites about the ground nesting birds that is aligned with our dates across the SPA but in their livery.
- 5.3 The team have liaised with partner organizations on a number of issues this year about changes or issues on-site. Issues have included MoD access issues at Hawley and fencing at Long Valley, Surrey County Council car park charges, Horsell common commercial dog walker licencing, HCC countryside canines scheme, Forestry Commission pylon works and other local site issues. This partnership working has been essential to convey a cohesive message to the public, to maximize engagement and build our reputation on-site and with partners.
- 5.4 The first season wardening the MoD land has gone very well. Feedback from the range marshalls and access specialist has been very good and we have run a number of joint events – pit stops and the multi agency event at Caesar's Camp. We have a review meeting with Col Dickie Bishop on 18th September.

6. Communications, Promotion and Events

- 6.1 The Thames Basin Heaths Partnership website can be accessed at www.tbhpartnership.org.uk. Over the summer, we have used the website to publish blogs from the wardens about the birds, our wardening activities, articles on wildfire and the wildlife on the heaths. The wording of our “Wildfire Alert!” article on what to do in the event of a wildfire was adopted by Surrey Wildlife Trust and also use by the NE Thames team in their comms. Since June, when the updated website went live, we have published 28 articles/blogs/news items and 26 events, including the Heath Week events. The analytics show a peak of activity in engagement around Heath Week and that this section and the greenspaces section of our website were the most popular amongst site users. Our most popular article was about educating children on the dangers of starting fires at the beginning of the school holidays, with 449 views.
- 6.2 The ‘Greenspace on your doorstep’ booklet is being handed out by the wardens on-site and at the pit-stop events in SPA car parks. The A5 booklet contains details of all the SANGs listed on the website along with a pull-out map. The public have given us great feedback about the booklet, such as “I’ve found some lovely places in there – can I have a couple to give to my friends please?” and “we are working our way through this booklet, we have visited about half the sites so far – it’s great!”.

We have begun to work with project partners on how to update this over the winter to include all the more recently opened SANGs and provide more information to the public about sites so they can easily select their preferences for where to visit.

- 6.3 We have produced a brand new main project leaflet to include a much larger map incorporating the SPA and also the SANGs. This was following feedback from site users, partners and feedback from academics who were researching the approach that it was useful to see the locations of alternative greenspace in relation to the SPA. The leaflet has been well received by partners and site users. The map graphic will be used in the update of the greenspace booklet, which will link the information in the two leaflets and maximize value for money.
- 6.4 Our ‘Heathland Hounds’ project, a dog owner focused initiative promoting positive behavior (specifically on the SPA but also more generally) has made good progress this summer. Run by warden Nicola Buckland (Nicky), the group is continuing to build steadily, with an additional 200 Facebook group members this year. We are seeing an increase in engagement with the FB group site and also had some excellent endorsements by group members. Organized dog walks have been held at Southwood Woodland and Hawley Meadows SANGs. We attended Paws in the Park, a large dog show in South Hill Park in Bracknell, on 18th August, with our Heathland Hounds information, where we handed out over 400 leaflets about the project and spoke to 180 people, virtually all of whom were dog owners.

We attended the Canines on the Common event at Horsell, engaging with dog walkers on the SANG at Heather Farm, promoting responsible dog walking on the common. Nicola has also been working with a dog behavior specialist called Natalie Light, who has provided training for volunteer “Heathland Ambassadors” under the HLF funded project in the South

Downs called "Take The Lead" <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/enjoy/take-the-lead/become-an-ambassador/> Natalie has provided training for the wardening team on keeping safe around dogs, and attended an event during Heath Week on Horsell Common, where over 50 people took advantage of her expertise and advice. She is also giving the project advice on how best to engage with dog owners and promote positive behavior on the SPA as well as reaching our target audience effectively.

- 6.5 We have been active on Twitter: The project used #30dayswild, a Wildlife Trust initiative event during June to promote SANGs by taking photographs of the sites and promoting them on Twitter. We did 36 tweets in all over the month, 21 of them about SANGs. 8 tweets mentioned dogs, 24 mentioned wildlife, 6 events, 6 facilities/access, 4 children and 2 mentioned history. We have tweeted regularly, using hashtags #magnificanetmeadows, #nationalplayday #nationalmeadowsday #mothnight and lots of tweets about #heathweek. The number of Twitter followers has increased from 294 at the beginning of the year to 450 now.
- 6.6 Our Facebook feed has been active during the summer. During June our Facebook posts reached 13,000 people, with 3,500 people actively engaging with posts. In July we reached 12.9K people, 3,100 of whom engaged with the posts. This has increased our number of Facebook Page likes from 341 at the beginning of the year to 471 page likes now. Our most popular post this summer was our April Fool, with 4.3K people reached, followed by our video about a mass emergence of Silver Studded Blues (4.1K) our post on the new generation of ground nesting birds (3.5K) and our post about events for Heath week (3.2K people reached). Other popular posts have been about reports of SPA bird species chicks in the nests (2.8K) and what to do if you spot a wildfire (1.8K people reached).
- 6.7 We have attended a greater number of events this year. We have been to Bisley Strawberry Fayre, Elvetham heath open day, Paws in the Park, Fleet Pond Open Day, Yateley Bioblitz, Canines on the Common, Beating the Bounds of Yateley, Bramshott Farm SANG open day, Yateley May Fayre, SwinDuro, Old Dean Fun Day, we have also run a guided walk on Larks Hill and the Cut Cluster and Brookwood Country Park. We have held numerous pit stops, including at Chobham Common, Yateley Red Cross Centre, Ceasars Camp, Whitmoor Common, Hawley Lake (joint with MoD), Wildmoor Heath, Lightwater Country Park, Ash, Velmead and Barossa.
- 6.8 Heath week was an event that we found out about when we visited the Devon and Dorset mitigation projects last autumn. They run Heath Week every year, and we decided to run a similar event on the TBH this year as a trial to build the profile of the project, develop links with partners and engage the public. We ran the event during the same week, 29th July-4th August. During the week we ran 17 events over 7 days. There were 10 guided walks & 7 themed activities including bird ringing, moth trapping, conservation grazing, wildfire awareness, a treasure hunt, free advice for dog walkers, history, arts & crafts. We had a great turnout despite extremes of weather (The first day was pouring with rain – and the latter part of the week was incredibly hot). 30 children took part in a nature-themed treasure hunt at Wildmoor. Over 60 people came to Caesar's Camp to meet the cattle and learn about the site and talk to the fire brigade and army. Over 50 people came to get free advice about dog behaviour. Project partners supported us well and we were able to share promotion and messages. The feedback has been excellent and we will be running this again next year.

6.9 We held a stakeholder meeting on Wednesday 5th September. This was to hear about research done on the approach by Liz Allinson in her PhD about “The role of SANGs in protecting high value wildlife sites” and Bethan Baxter who did her MSc on "Putting people at the heart of the environment: The visitor access and conservation conflict of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA". Both presentations were excellent and the event generated some interesting questions and suggestions for further research. The summaries and recommendations from these presentations will be circulated to the board, once received.