

Minutes of a Meeting of the Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board 20 April 2018

Present: Councillor Moira Gibson, Surrey Heath Borough Council (Chairman)
Councillor Jonathan Glen, Hampshire County Council
Councillor Mike Goodman, Surrey County Council
Councillor Angus Ross, Wokingham Borough Council
Councillor Chris Turrell, Bracknell Forest Borough Council

In Attendance: Sarah Bunce, Natural England
Anne Conquest, Natural England
Paul Druce, Surrey County Council
Julie Gil, Bracknell Forest Borough Council
Daniel Hawes, Hart Borough Council
Jane Ireland, Surrey Heath Borough Council
Dan Knowles, Guildford Borough Council
Helena Merriott, Elbridge Borough Council
Heather Richards, RSPB
Robert Sarfas, Hampshire County Council
Andrew Smith, Natural England
John Thorne, Rushmoor Borough Council
Marc Turner, Natural England
Jennifer Wadham, Hampshire County Council

Apologies: Councillor Karen Randolph, Elmbridge Borough Council
Councillor James Radley, Hart Borough Council
Councillor Graham Cockarill, Hart Borough Council
Councillor David Parr, Runnymede Borough Council
Councillor Graham Chrystie, Woking Borough Council

8 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Thames Basin Heath Joint Strategic Partnership Board held on 7th December 2017 be approved as a correct record.

It was noted that Sarah Bunce, not Katie Breach, who had represented Natural England at the meeting.

9 Investment Strategy Working Group Update

The Board received a report setting out a proposed way forward for the investment of the funds held in the Thames Basin Heaths Endowment Fund in order to ensure that the best returns were obtained for the money held by the Partnership in the years to come.

It was noted that the balance held in the Endowment Fund currently received interest at the rate of 0.25% per annum. Under the terms of the Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) agreement the Board had a responsibility to review the value and performance of the Endowment Fund on a regular basis and provide direction to the

Administering Body (Currently Hampshire County Council) as to when, how and from whom the services of an Independent Financial Advisor was to be procured.

A Working Group had held discussions with the Board's finance officers and proposals for an investment strategy had been developed. It was proposed that a conservative approach that enabled investments to generate sufficient income to cover ongoing costs be adopted by the Board and the following strategy was proposed:

- i. Approximately £1million should be kept in cash in the Maintenance Account to fund projected expenditure for a period of two years.
- ii. The primary aim of any investments would be to generate income, rather than capital growth
- iii. Investments should be subject to the lowest risk possible to achieve investment return and should not be susceptible to big fluctuations.
- iv. A target rate of return on investment should be calculated using the current balance held in the Endowment Account plus a reasonable assumption of future income to give a target percentage rate of return required to meet projected costs in perpetuity.
- v. The IFA would be asked to advise on a recommended mix of investment types
- vi. It would be acknowledged by the Board that the target rate of return would vary depending on actual income and expenditure and that the target percentage rate of return may not be achieved.

It was agreed that the Investment Strategy and investments would be formally reviewed by the Board on an annual basis.

It had been acknowledged that additional expertise would be required to ensure that any investments were appropriate and met the Board's proposed aims and objectives. It was agreed that the Working Group would work with the Partnership's Financial Officers to identify a suitable Independent Financial Advisor.

Agreed Actions:

- i. That the proposed investment strategy be adopted**
- ii. Partner Authorities forward details of their Council's financial advisors to the Working Group.**
- iii. The Working Group identifies and recommends to the Board an appropriate Independent Financial Advisor.**

10 Wealdon Judgement: Natural England Response and Future Advice

Mark Turner, Natural England, gave a presentation in respect of the advice being provided by Natural England in relation to air pollution following the Wealdon Judgement.

Following the 2017 judicial review, Natural England had drawn up guidance that local authorities could use to ascertain assessment requirements to measure the impact of developments on air quality as part of the Local Plan process. The guidance, which covered emissions from road traffic and the impact that these had on local ecology had been developed to provide officers with a user friendly step wise process that could be used to determine the level and type of assessment required. It was stressed that none of the thresholds referenced in previous literature had been changed and a measurement of 1% of Critical Load/Level; 200m from the N₂K site; 1,000 average vehicular movements per day (AADT) was still to be used during the assessment process.

The stepped process asked a series of questions the answers to which determined the response required and whether a planning authority needed to move to the next stage in the process.

- Step 1 - Does the proposal give rise to emissions which were likely to reach a European site?
- Step 2 – Are the qualifying features of sites within 200m of a road sensitive to air pollution?
- Step 3 – Could the sensitive qualifying features of the site be exposed to emissions?
- Step 4 – Application of screening thresholds
 - Step 4a – Apply the threshold alone
 - Step 4b – Apply the threshold in-combination with emissions from other road traffic plans and projects
 - Step 4c – Apply the threshold in-combination with emissions from other non-road plans and projects
- Step 5 – Advise on the need for Appropriate Assessment where thresholds are exceeded, either alone or in-combination

In Combination assessments had to take into account all live plans that were known about including local plans and planning permissions. The Board was informed that the biggest change as a result of the Wealdon Judgement was Step 4b when once all the Local Plan modelling had been added together the 1000 AADT, 1% threshold should be revisited. If it was subsequently found that the 1% threshold had been exceeded then an Appropriate Assessment was required.

It was reported that Natural England was providing advice and input to planning authorities in relation to both Local Plan development and individual planning applications. Natural England acknowledged that there had been an initial information vacuum following the Wealdon Judgment which had impacted in local planning authorities however it was expected that the development of the new approach would enable them to provide better advice and support at an earlier stage in the planning process.

It was noted that Windsor and Maidenhead Council had produced an exemplar Air Pollution Assessment document.

It was agreed that the presentation would be circulated to the Board.

The Board thanked Mark Turner for his presentation.

11 Natural England's Response to Local Plans and Sustainable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANGS) Availability and Advice

The Board received a presentation in respect of the future of Suitable Accessible Natural Green Space (SANGS). The presentation included an overview of the current position and a summary of challenges and potential options available going forward.

The Thames Basin Heaths SPA was considered a national exemplar of how to use an SPA for recreational purposes and Natural England were committed to helping the Board develop and enhance the Thames Basin Heaths SPA both for wildlife and residents.

It was recognised that land availability in and around the SPA for both housing and SANGS was finite and that a flexible approach to the future provision of SANG would be required. Initial work to find a possible resolution to the issue had identified a number of potential options including:

- Adjusting the Strategic Solution rules
- Weighting SAMM contributions differently for example a local authority contributes less to the SAMM fund whilst increasing the amount of land they make available for SANGs
- Fencing off the SPA
- Developing a more strategic approach to parking at SANGS sites
- Making use of Dog Control Orders
- Working with the Forest Commission and the Crown Estate to open up more land

It was reported that the Planning and Land Management Teams had met with Highways England to discuss the proposed improvements to the M25-M3 interchange and the environmental impacts that the improvements would have on the surrounding SPA. It had been made clear that Highways England would need to take into account both air pollution and compensatory land as well. Highways England had subsequently indicated that they had identified land to replace that lost however to date no further details had been given.

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

- It was essential that a holistic approach was taken towards the future delivery of SANGs and that a flexible approach was developed.
- Changing the calculation used to determine how much SANG should be provided as part of a development agreement could open local authorities up to significant levels of challenge from developers who had already provided SANS.
- Whilst anecdotal evidence suggested that SANGS worked it was essential that a robust evidence base was developed to support this.
- The obligation placed on local authorities to revisit their Strategic Housing Needs Assessments every five years would impact on future SANGS provision.

It was agreed that a more in-depth discussion on the future of SANG provision would be held at a later Board meeting.

12 Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Project Update

The Board received a report providing an update on the Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) Project. The report summarised the projects 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.

Key highlights included:

- The successful recruitment of 7 new seasonal wardens bringing the number of full time equivalent wardens working on the project to 6.
- The delivery of 5,978 hours of wardening activity during 2017.
- The introduction of iPads to collect visitor feedback during the 2017 Winter SANG Surveys. As part of this work 7 full SANG surveys (each consisting of 18 hours of interviews) were completed in the eight week period up to March 2018.
- The completion of an agreement with the Ministry of Defence to enable SAMM project wardens access to the military training estate on the SPA area. This was the first agreement of its kind in the Country and the SAMM Team was now working with the Defence Infrastructure Team to successfully implement the agreement on the ground.

- The website continued to receive positive feedback. To ensure that the website was kept relevant and accessible, work was taking place to review and expand its content to include a calendar of events, downloadable resources and a dedicated page to publicise the Heathland Hounds initiative.
- Links were being developed with South Down National Park.
- Work was taking place to develop a more robust data set in relation to visitor numbers.
- In order to expand the educational offer available it was proposed that an Education Officer be employed. If approved the appointment would run to the end of the 2019/20 financial year. Full time salary costs would be in the region of £32,700 per annum.

It was agreed that details of events and activities that the SAMM Team were involved with would be circulated to the Board so that members could attend and learn more about the project.

The Board commended the SAMM Team for their successful completion of the agreement to enable access to MOD Land.

RESOLVED that the appointment of an Education Officer be progressed.

13 Financial Report

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

It was noted that as at 31st March 2018, the balance in the Endowment Fund was £4.387million. A further £797,868 was held in the Maintenance Fund to pay for project expenditure. Projections showed that a further £2.44million would be added to the Endowment Fund in the 2017/18 financial year giving an anticipated total of £6.831million available to be invested.

The Board noted the current financial position.

The Board noted that Jenny Wadham would be taking up a new role within Hampshire County Council and financial advice would be given by Robert Sarfas for the next twelve months. The Board thanked Jenny Wadham for the help and support that she had given the SAMM project.

14 Any Other Business

The Board noted that Jane Ireland would be retiring at the end of the month. The Board thanked her for all the work that she had done to support the partnership and wished her well in the future.

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