

**Minutes of a Meeting of the Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board
22 June 2022**

Present:

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 James Radley, Hart Borough Council
Councillor Karen Randolph, Elmbridge Borough Council
Councillor Ian Shenton, Wokingham Borough Council
Councillor Peter Snow, Runnymede Borough Council
Councillor Chris Turrell, Bracknell Forest Borough Council

**Advisors In
Attendance:**

Daria Dadum, Natural England
Tom Hayward, BBOWT
Amar Jandoo, Arlingclose
Ruth Shelton, Natural England
Jack Thompson, RSPB
Mark Turner, Natural England

**Officers In
Attendance:**

Ernest Amoako, Woking Borough Council
Simon Cridland, Bracknell Forest Borough Council
Duncan Fisher, Wokingham Borough Council
Julie Gil, Bracknell Forest Borough Council
Heather Lewis, Rushmoor Borough Council
Vincent Maher, Rushmoor Borough Council
Jennifer Wadham, Hampshire County Council

Observers:

Councillor Jerry Hyman, Waverley Borough Council

Apologies:

Councillor Liam Lyons, Woking Borough Council
Councillor Joss Bigmore, Guildford Borough Council
Councillor David Cornish, Wokingham Borough Council
Councillor Adrian Newell, Rushmoor Borough Council

1 Election of Chairman

RESOLVED that Councillor Chris Turrell be elected Chairman of the Thames Basin Heath Joint Strategic Partnership Board for the 2022/23 municipal year.

2 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Thames Basin Heath (TBH) Joint Strategic Partnership Board (JSPB) held on 18th November 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

3 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 on 18th November 2021 and included updates on staffing, warden activity, educational work and monitoring activity.

It was reported that since the Board's last meeting, a further three areas of Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANGS) had been added to the Thames Basin Heath area taking the total number of SANGS in the area to 77.

It was noted that six seasonal wardens had been successfully recruited and all were now trained and working across the SAMM area. The recruitment process had been a challenging one and in an effort to ensure that these difficulties were reduced in future years work experience placements and job shadowing opportunities had been developed. Links with local colleges offering conservation courses were also being developed further to raise awareness of the Special Protection Area (SPA) and the SAMM project amongst students.

The Board was informed that ahead of her imminent retirement Sarah Bunce, Communications Officer, had indicated that she would in May 2023 like to change from full time work to part time work. The role was considered to be a key one within the SAMM Team and the Board's opinion on recruiting an additional communications officer was sought. If approved the additional role would not only enable a smooth handover of responsibilities but also, on an interim basis, provide additional resource that would enable the SAMM Team's work to be communicated more widely. It was agreed that consideration would be given to the request on the receipt of a fully costed report.

It was reported that with a number of the SAMM project team employed on a part time basis there was sufficient funding in the agreed funding budget to cover the cost of employing an additional year round warden on a full time basis without the need for any additional funding. It was agreed that the recruitment of an additional year round warden should be progressed.

Between December 2021 and March 2022 in person visitor surveys were completed at all 75 SANGS that were open at that time. In total 262 survey sessions were completed with 836 people being counted across all sites. A QR based SANGS survey initiated at 46 SANGS in December 2020 continued to run albeit with much lower response rates than previously observed.

The majority, over 70%, of those surveyed indicated that their main reason for visiting the area was dog walking with most stating that their visit lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. 39% of those surveyed said that they visited SANGS one to three times a week and over 60% stated that the proximity of a SANG was the main driver for choosing one SANG over another.

To improve the robustness of visitor number data, agreement was sought for the installation of six additional visitor counters at locations across the TBH area which were currently not monitored. Subject to approval of the funding it was hoped that satellite counters, which would enable visitor numbers to be monitored in real time, could be installed at six additional locations, at a cost of £15,021.60 plus an annual service charge. It was noted that where visitor numbers were currently monitored a physical visit had to be made to the monitor's location so that the data collected could be physically downloaded, a process that took up a significant amount of time. Furthermore, a number of the visitor monitors currently in use were reaching the end of their expected lifespan and would need to be replaced in the near future. It was suggested that a trial of the new satellite monitors could provide useful information as to the benefits of rolling satellite monitors out across the TBH area. It was agreed that consideration would be given to the approval of funding for the installation of six new satellite monitors on the receipt of a fully costed report which included the costs of the standard monitors.

It was accepted that completing SANG visitor surveys in the summer would give a more accurate picture of their use; however it was acknowledged that this was dependent on having sufficient resources available to capture good quality data.

The Board was informed that the current providers of the bird monitoring surveys had indicated they would be withdrawing from the market sometime within the next five years and it was necessary to go out to tender for a new provider. It was considered an opportune time to revisit the current data collection model, which was reliant on volunteers who did not always survey consistently. Consequently, whilst general year on year trends in bird numbers could be shown the data was insufficiently robust to enable a full statistical analysis to be carried out, something that was considered vital to demonstrating the success or otherwise of the SAMM project. A number of potential options for the future delivery of the bird surveys and a full analysis of these would be brought to the Board's next meeting.

The SAMM Team's primary focus continued to be education and engagement and the number of hours wardened and the number of interactions per hour had now returned to pre-Covid levels. Regular events and pop up sessions were now taking place with team members participating in 33 pop up sessions and 49 events between November 2021 and May 2022. Following reports of large numbers of out of control dogs at Sheets Heath near Brookwood staff had worked in partnership with the local police force to deliver a number of site visits to raise awareness of nesting birds and responsible dog ownership. The education offer continued to be developed and approximately 220 schools within 5km of the SPA had been contacted directly and offered the opportunity to participate in free heathland themed activities including visits to the heathland.

The Team would again be participating in Heath Week. To date 27 heathland related activities had been scheduled to take place between 25th and 31st July 2022 and more were being added each week.

It was noted that although the Board had agreed, at its meeting in November 2020, that tariffs were to be increased annually in line with inflation there had been some confusion over these were being applied. It was agreed that officers would be asked to confirm by email that this increase was being applied.

It was questioned whether there was a blueprint for the creation of an ideal SANG which set out requirements for factors including size, location, habitats, amenities and distance from SANG

RESOLVED that:

- i. The contents of the report on SAMM project activity be noted.
- ii. An additional year round warden be employed.
- iii. A report detailing the implications of employing an additional interim Communications Officer be circulated by email for approval by 15 July 2022.
- iv. A report detailing the implications of the installation of six additional satellite visitor counters on a trial basis be circulated for approval by 15th July 2022.
- v. Officers to be asked to confirm that annual tariff increases in line with inflation were being applied.
- vi. A report setting out the options for future bird surveys to be brought to the Board's next meeting.

4 Natural England Strategic Overview

It was agreed that due to time constraints this item would be deferred to the Board's next meeting.

5 Thames Basin Heaths Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Project Financial Update

The Board received a report summarising the current financial position of the SAMM project.

It was reported that as of 31st March 2022, £1.5million was held in the maintenance Fund and £14.793million in the Endowment Fund. In respect of the Endowment Fund £7.932million was held in investments and £6.862million held as cash. Over the course of the 2021/22 financial year income of £2.602million had been received for the SAMM project, of which £2.130million was tariff income collected by Local Planning Authorities, £459,626 was dividends received on investments and £12,767 was the interest on cash balances held.

In accordance with the Board's agreed investment strategy, the balance on the Maintenance Fund continued to be maintained at £1.5million, with any balances above or below that level being transferred to or from the Endowment Fund as appropriate.

A total of £508,251 of costs had been incurred during the 2021/22, an increase of £26,364 against the projected spend in November 2021 due to the successful recruitment to vacant posts. It was noted that the dividend income combined with the interest received during the 2021/22 financial year had been sufficient to fund 93% of the SAMM project's expenditure for the year. Projections showed that the combination of dividend income and interest would, assuming a 5% dividend return, be sufficient to fully fund SAMM project expenditure from 2023/24 onwards.

The Board was informed that across the three years to 2024/25 a further £7.697million of tariff income was expected. Assuming interest rates remained at their current level and an annual dividend return rate on investments of 5% was received, it was projected that total dividend income of £1.760million and £0.252million of interest would be received over the three year period to 2024/25; giving a total income of £7.933million.

RESOLVED that:

- i. The financial position for the year ended 31st March 2022, as set out in appendix 1 of the report, be agreed.
- ii. The transfer of funds from the Maintenance Fund to the Endowment Fund to maintain a balance of £1.5million in the Maintenance Fund be noted.
- iii. The projected financial position for the three financial years to 31st March 2025 is noted.
- iv. The balance held within the Endowment Fund at 31st March 2022 of £140.793million, held as £7.932 as investments and £6.862million as cash (with investments of £5.7million pending) be noted.

6 Investment Working Group Update

The Board received a report providing an update on the work of the JSPB's Investment Working Group.

The Board was reminded that because it was not a separate legal entity any investments approved by the JSPB were in actuality made by Hampshire County Council in its capacity as the Administrative Body.

At the Board's meetings in December 2020 and December 2021 it had been agreed that a further £3.2million and £2.5million respectively was to be invested, with the investments being made as soon as reasonably possible. It was reported that due to unexpected delays in opening a new account with one of the selected investment funds (CCLA Diversified Income Fund) the December 2020 investments had been delayed. Subsequent changes to the Prudential Code (which prevented Council from accessing external borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board if they were investing for commercial returns) in December 2021 had resulted in further delays as Hampshire County Council sought to assure themselves that these changes did not impact its borrowing eligibility due to investments held or due to be made. It was noted that it was expected that the £5.7million of investments would now be made by the end of July 2022.

The Board was reminded that Arlingclose had been contracted to provide financial advice to the Board on a rolling twelve monthly contract. If the Board was minded to terminate this contract then notice had to be given to Arlingclose by September each year for the contract to end in the December. It was agreed that the advice given to date had been positive and that the contract should be allowed to continue to run for a further twelve month period.

It was clarified that the Responsible Investing Policy developed by the Working Group had been based on the Royal Berkshire Pension Fund's Responsible Investment Policy. The Board's Responsible Investment Policy was currently in the process of being reviewed; as part of this review Arlingclose would be asked to ensure that the policy was deliverable before it was shared with the wider Board for comment. Concerns about the definition of Environmental, Social and Governance factors used in the policy were noted and it was agreed that this would be followed up outside the meeting.

It was noted that a third member of the Working Group was required and it was agreed that Councillor D'Arcy, Waverley Borough Council, would be appointed to the vacancy.

RESOLVED that:

- i. Councillor D'Arcy be appointed to the Investment Working Group.
- ii. The Investment Strategy, set out in Appendix 1 of the report, be noted.
- iii. The Responsible Investing Policy, set out in Appendix 2 of the report, be noted
- iv. The annual timescales for terminating the contract with Arlingclose be noted.
- v. The amounts available for investment as set out in Table 3 and the projected cash flow scenarios set out in Appendix 3 be noted
- vii. The requirements and practical implications, specifically outlined in paragraphs 39-46 of the report, surrounding any investment decisions made by the JSPB before any investments can be made by the Administrative Body on behalf of the JSPB be noted.

7 Exclusion of Public and Press

RESOLVED that the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of Item 9 Investment update as it involves the likely disclose of 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 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

8 Investment Update

Amar Jandoo, 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 reminded that to date a total of £10.2 million had been invested since December 2018 as follows:

- £2million – CCLA Local Authorities Property Fund
- £3million – Aegon Diversified Monthly Income Fund
- £3.2million – Ninety One Diversified Income Fund
- £2million – Schroder Income Maximiser

It was reported that to date, the investments had realised a dividend income of £1,300,705 a figure which represented an approximate return of 10% on the Board's investments. A small unrealised capital loss of £281,431 was noted however it was stressed that this was money that would only be lost in the event that the funds were sold.

It was expected that a further round of investments would be made in March 2023 and suggestions as to what these might be would be brought to the Board's next meeting for consideration.

The Board thanked Arlingclose for their work to date.

9 Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next scheduled meeting of the Thames Basin Heaths Joint Strategic Partnership Board would take place on Wednesday 16th July 2022 at 10am.