

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT BOARD
Monday, 4 December 2023

Minutes of the meeting of the Natural Environment Board held at Committee Room -
2nd Floor West Wing, Guildhall on Monday, 4 December 2023 at 10.00 am

Present

Members:

Caroline Haines (Chair)
Andrew McMurtrie (Deputy Chairman)
Eamonn Mullally
Wendy Mead
Oliver Sells KC
Catherine Bickmore (Observer)

In Attendance:

Benjamin Murphy
William Upton KC
James St John Davis
Paul Morris (Observer)

Officers:

Emily Brennan	- Environment Department
Anna Cowperthwaite	- Comptroller and City Solicitor's
Ken Dunbar	- Environment Department
Sally Gadsdon	- Environment Department
Simon Glynn	- Environment Department
Clem Harcourt	- Chamberlain's Department
Joanne Hill	- Environment Department
Jo Hurst	- Environment Department
Joe Kingston	- Environment Department
William LoSasso	- Environment Department
Simon Owen	- Chamberlain's Department
Robert Shakespeare	- Environment Department
Blair Stringman	- Town Clerk's Department
Jake Tibbets	- Environment Department

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

2. MEMBERS' DECLARATIONS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT IN RESPECT OF ITEMS ON THE AGENDA

There were no declarations.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED – That, the public and non-public summary of the minutes of the meeting held on the 16 October 2023 be agreed as a correct record.

4. **FORMAL THANKS TO SUPERINTENDENT/ASSISTANT DIRECTOR - EPPING FOREST**

The Board received a formal thanks to the Superintendent/Assistant Director of Epping Forest.

The board wishes to express its appreciation to Paul Thomson for his outstanding leadership as Superintendent of Epping Forest for the past 15 years.

Under Mr. Thomson's guidance, a team of 75 has diligently protected and enhanced Epping Forest, managing a budget of £4.5 million and overseeing additional projects totalling £14 million. His innovative conservation strategies, such as the 'fenceless' grazing initiative, showcase his commitment to progressive environmental practices.

Mr. Thomson's role in governance, collaboration with Members and Verderers, and his instrumental work with seven Local Planning Authorities have been pivotal in ensuring the sustained protection of Epping Forest. Additionally, his financial acumen has significantly increased annual income from £675,000 to over £2 million.

His success in securing external funding, including the £6.8 million 'Branching Out' project, has played a vital role in enhancing the forest's facilities and sustainability.

We extend our sincere thanks to Mr. Thomson for his exceptional service and wish him continued success in his future endeavours.

RESOLVED – That, the formal thanks be noted.

5. **REVISED TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The Board considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning a revised Terms of Reference of the Natural Environment Board.

Members discussed observer and external representative appointments, advertising positions, staggering terms, and strategic oversight of the board. A Member raised concerns on the Natural Environment Director's appointment and administrative responsibilities as outlined in the Terms of Reference and points of clarification were also sought on the board's role in charity governance. The chair proposed addressing changes to the Terms of Reference through delegated authority as contained in the recommendation(s) of the report noting to revisit observer arrangements after a year. It was proposed that Members feedback to officers for redrafting of the Terms of Reference prior to the report being taken to the Policy and Resources Committee.

RESOLVED – That Members, delegate Authority to the Town Clerk in consultation with the Chairmen and Deputy Chairmen of the Natural Environment Board, to consider any final changes to the Terms of Reference arising from discussion.

6. ***REPORT OF ACTION TAKEN**

The Board received a report of the Town Clerk, concerning a report of action taken under urgency procedures since the last meeting.

RESOLVED – That, the report be noted.

7. **REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGETS 2024/25**

The Board considered a joint report of the Chamberlain and Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning approval of the revenue and capital budgets for the Natural Environment Board for 2024/25, for subsequent submission to Finance Committee.

The report presented the revenue and capital budgets for 2024/25 for City Gardens, Bunhill fields, the Natural Environment Directorate, and the Learning team. It was noted that the overall proposed net expenditure budget for 2024/25 was 2.487 million, representing an increase compared to the 2023/24 original budget. The budget included adjustments for inflation, ward adjustments, and transfer of staffing budgets from other divisions.

During the meeting, several questions and concerns were raised, seeking clarity on budgetary matters. In response to queries officers clarified that there was a slight underspend projected for the current year, factored into the latest budget. Members were informed that the increase in the budget was predominantly attributed to changes in central risk budgets, while other budgets remained relatively consistent. Additionally, the rise in the net central risk budget in 2023/24 was explained as being linked to operational property review work and an IT transformation project for City Gardens.

Regarding salary increases and the cost of living, it was noted that the pay award of a 3% uplift or £4,000, whichever was greater, had been fully met by the Central Chamberlains Department. Furthermore, staffing changes and reorganisation were highlighted, indicating an increase in the transfer of staffing budget to the Natural Environment Directorate from April 2024, specifically related to business service staff and other open spaces staff transferring over.

In response to a Member's request for a review of the budget, the Director of Natural Environment committed to conducting a thorough review twelve months, evaluating what was working well and making any necessary adjustments. The chair acknowledged ongoing efforts to improve the clarity of documentation provided to the board.

RESOLVED – That Members,

- a) Approve the proposed revenue budget for 2024/25 for your Board for submission to Finance Committee.
- b) Approve the City Gardens capital and supplementary revenue budgets for 2024/25 for submission to Finance Committee.
- c) Agree that amendments for 2023/24 and 2024/25 budgets arising from changes to recharges or for any further implications arising from

corporate contracts, energy price increases, changes to the Cyclical Works Programme (CWP) and capital charges during budget setting be authorised to the Chamberlain in consultation with the Interim Executive Director Environment.

8. ***OPERATIONAL FINANCE PROGRESS REPORT (PERIOD 6 APRIL – SEPTEMBER 2023) 2023/24 – NATURAL ENVIRONMENT DIVISION**

The Board received a report of the Chamberlain concerning an update on the operational finance position as of period 6 (April – September 2023) 2023/24 for the Natural Environment Division's local risk revenue budget to date and projected year-end outturn position, current live capital projects and outstanding debt position.

RESOLVED – That, the report be noted.

9. ***MID-YEAR UPDATE ON THE MONUMENT – APRIL - SEPTEMBER 2023**

The Board received a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning achievements at the Monument to the Great Fire of London between April and September 2023.

In this mid-year update, officers informed Members that they were working on medium and longer-term strategies to return to profit, addressing governance questions, and acknowledging that certain details were still a work in progress. Members noted that a meeting was scheduled for the next week with colleagues from the City Surveyors Department and Destination City to discuss alternative governance arrangements for the Monument. Officers noted ongoing efforts to address concerns about the Monument's financial position, with a focus on collaboration with City Bridge Foundation staff. Members were informed that post-pandemic visitors were increasing year on year, though full recovery may take time.

RESOLVED – That, the report be noted.

10. **DOGS ON LEAD**

The Board received a verbal update from the City Gardens Manager concerning dog control and other City Garden matters.

On the matter of dogs at Bunhill Fields, officers provided an update noting in the past year, there have been 135 recorded incidents, with 69 of them related to dogs off leads. Members were informed that three options were under consideration: banning dogs altogether, introducing designated dog areas within the garden, or maintaining the current legislation of dogs on leads. There was a brief discussion on the wider issue of dog control in open spaces, with Members raising concerns about public health risks and the need for coordinated efforts. The board acknowledged the need for better coordination and discussed plans for internal working groups to address dog-related challenges.

In relation to Finsbury Circus, officers reported that the site has been handed over to contractors to conduct work. It was noted that the public would be

restricted from accessing the site for approximately a year, with plans to reopen in November 2023/24.

RESOLVED – That, the verbal update be noted.

11. **SUMMARY OF NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AWAY DAY**

The Board considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning options for the vision, mission and strategies for the Natural Environment Division for approval.

Members discussed the importance of clarity of language with suggestions in the future to consider including terms such as "semi-natural habitats" and "cultural landscape" in the mission. The Chairman concluded that a period of reflection in the early summer would take place and updates on progress of the strategies would be brought back to the board at a later in the year.

RESOLVED – That Members,

- a) Endorse the Natural Environment Division's vision.
- b) Endorse the Natural Environment Division's mission.
- c) Approve the four Natural Environment Division Strategies:
 - 1) Conservation and Nature Resilience
 - 2) Community Engagement
 - 3) Access and Recreation
 - 4) Culture, Heritage and Learning

12. ***BUSINESS PLAN 2023/24 – PROGRESS REPORT (MID-YEAR, APRIL-SEPTEMBER 2023)**

The Board received a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning an update on progress against the Environment Department's high-level Business Plan 2023/24.

RESOLVED – That, the report be noted.

13. **QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE**

There were no questions.

14. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT AND WHICH THE COMMITTEE AGREE SHOULD BE CONSIDERED**

There was no urgent business.

15. **EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

RESOLVED – That, under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act.

16. **NON-PUBLIC MINUTES**

RESOLVED – That, the non-public minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2023 be agreed as a correct record.

17. ***DEBT ARREARS – NATURAL ENVIRONMENT DIVISION**

The Board received a joint report of the Chamberlain and Interim Executive Director, Environment.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

18. *** CARBON REMOVALS (CLIMATE ACTION) PROJECT RESCOPING REAPPROVAL (JANUARY 2024)**

The Board received a joint report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment and Executive Director of Innovation & Growth.

RESOLVED – That, the report be noted.

19. **QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE**

There were no questions.

20. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT AND WHICH THE COMMITTEE AGREE SHOULD BE CONSIDERED WHILST THE PUBLIC ARE EXCLUDED**

There was no urgent business.

The meeting ended at 11:41pm

Chairman

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