

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT BOARD
Thursday, 11 July 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Natural Environment Board held at Committee Room 2
- 2nd Floor West Wing, Guildhall on Thursday, 11 July 2024 at 11.00 am

Present

Members:

Caroline Haines (Chair)
Eamonn Mullally (Deputy Chairman)
Heather Barrett-Mold
Catherine Bickmore
Anne Corbett
Tony Leach
Benjamin Murphy
Andrew McMurtrie
Deputy Alpa Raja
William Upton KC (Ex-Officio Member)

In Attendance:

Alderman Gregory Jones KC

External:

Simon Lightman (King Edward's Witley)

Officers:

Clem Harcourt	- Chamberlain's Department
Pauline Mouskis	- Chamberlain's Department
Jack Joslin	- City Bridge Foundation
Anna Cowperthwaite	- Comptroller and City Solicitor's
Chandni Tanna	- Communications & External Affairs
Emily Brennan	- Environment Department
Simon Glynn	- Environment Department
Joanne Hill	- Environment Department
Jo Hurst	- Environment Department
Joe Kingston	- Environment Department
Sam Lee	- Environment Department
Jonathan Meares	- Environment Department
Jake Tibbetts	- Environment Department
Callum Southern	- Town Clerk's Department

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from James St John Davis, Vladislav Dobrokhotov, Wendy Mead OBE and Verderer Paul Morris.

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

No declarations were made.

3. **MINUTES**

3.1 **Draft Minutes of the Natural Environment Board Meeting on 16th May 2024**

RESOLVED – That, the public minutes of the last meeting held on 16th May 2024 be agreed as a correct record.

4. ***NATURAL ENVIRONMENT DIRECTOR'S REPORT**

The Board received a report of the Natural Environment Director concerning an update on matters relating to the Natural Environment Board since the last board meeting on 16 May 2024.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) The Board expressed thanks to the Natural Environment Director for her work over the last year since joining the Corporation.
- b) The difficulty of filling vacancies was raised by the Board. Officers indicated that there were challenges with job descriptions needing to be re-written, as well as long-term sickness, and roles had needed to be re-advertised in the past due to quality of some candidates.
- c) Members indicated that post-COVID in-office arrangements had contributed to issues with recruitment.
- d) It was suggested the staff surveys recently seen by Corporate Services Committee needed to be seen by Natural Environment committees to review the information provided.
- e) It was highlighted by Members that low-level grievances consumed a significant amount of staff time and resource.

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5. **ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF CHARITIES & COMMERCIAL VERBAL UPDATE**

The Board received a verbal update from the Assistant Director for Charity Development on the next phase income strategy, specifically on grants, rentals and the biodiversity net gain.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) The Chair reiterated the need for the charities review to be responsive to Members' views and requests for information on its review and progress.
- b) Members considered what prioritisation with the City Surveyors would look like. Officers reported that they were working on a different model for work between charities and surveyors, specially on how grant funding may affect central element of charities' funding.
- c) It was discussed whether Officers had the required resource to complete the asset review element of the charities review. Officers indicated they had a colleague dedicated to working with Surveyors on updating asset lists and that they were also waiting for Surveyors to be properly resourced for some projects.
- d) The Board expressed the importance of identifying assets and sought clarity over the timeline for doing that. Officers informed Members that 45 conditional surveys had been carried out across lodges as they were at the forefront of Officer's concerns and findings had been shared with City Surveyors.
- e) Members reiterated the need for City Surveyors to have Officers present at meetings of Natural Environment Board. Officers reported that Surveyors had committed to attending meetings from Autumn onwards.
- f) The Chair highlighted that it would be up to individual charities to agree plans for assets following the review. Officers added that the condition surveys included fire protection and general fabric condition surveys; the assets were considered to be domestic buildings for the purpose of those surveys.
- g) Officers reported that the Chair of the Operational Property Review Group had received a tour of the open spaces to demonstrate requirements of some of the buildings and the legislative constraints.
- h) Officers explained to the Board that the objective was to establish a list of assets on a charity-by-charity basis and would not stall vital backlog work or prevent Committees from taking decisions.

6. RISK MANAGEMENT UPDATE

The Board considered a report of the Natural Environment Director concerning the Natural Environment Cross-Divisional Risk Register which included risks which are managed by the Natural Environment Director at a higher, strategic, level.

Officers reported that the risk of a lack of an asset register had been reduced from a 16 to a 12 rating; the negative impacts of wildlife management risk had also been reduced. Additionally, Officers reiterated that the highest risk for the cross divisional register was the declining condition of assets while the highest risk for City Gardens was the negative impact of public behaviour.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) The Board suggested adding two risks relating to the potential change to the funding model of the charities and interdepartmental collaboration.
- b) Questions were raised about whether the NEB risk register used aggregated figures. Officers explained that it was not a sum as it had to use the same risk scoring matrix, but the highest level of risk was taken and did reflect the combined risk across all of the charities.

RESOLVED – That, Members confirmed, in relation to the City Gardens and on behalf of the City Corporation as Trustee (as relevant), that the Natural Environment Cross-Divisional Summary Risk Register satisfactorily identified the key high-level risks to the charities and that an appropriate risk management process was in place.

7. *ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT HIGH-LEVEL BUSINESS PLAN PROGRESS REPORT (YEAR-END 2023-24)

The Board received a report on an update on progress toward the delivery of the Environment Department's high-level Business Plan 2023/24. The report summarised the progress that had been made against major workstreams and performance measures during 2023/24.

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8. *REVENUE OUTTURN 2023/24

The Board received a report which compared the revenue outturn for the services overseen by the Board in 2023/24 with the final budget for the year. The report noted, in total, that there was an adverse budget position of £246,000 for the services overseen by the Board compared with the final budget for the year.

During the discussion, the following point was made:

- a) Following requests for clarity by the Board, Officers confirmed that the net cost per annum to the Corporation of the Open Spaces was £19.1m for 2023/24.

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9. FINSBURY CIRCUS ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS

The Board received a report on a project seeking to implement accessibility improvements and to rearrange parking to enable improvements and micromobility parking in line with the Liverpool Street Area Healthy Streets Plan.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) The Board queried whether there were going to be dockless cycle bays around Finsbury Circus. Officers confirmed there were no planned cycle racks at Finsbury Circus.

RESOLVED – That, Members agree, to the proposed changes to the pathways at the entrances inside Finsbury Circus Gardens, to align with the adjacent highway measures shown on the plan in Appendix 2 of the report.

10. ***CITY GARDENS UPDATE**

The Board received a report which provided an update on the current management and operational activities across the City Gardens department.

Officers reported that issues with dogs had been prevalent for some time, with 64 incidents of dogs off leads with 61 at Bunhill Fields. They were currently in the process of recruiting a keeper to enforce park byelaws and were working with the Comptroller and City Solicitor to investigate Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) as a potential means of encouraging responsible dog ownership across the City.

During the discussion, the following points were made:

- a) Officers indicated they would return to Committee with a presentation on tackling box hedging.
- b) The Chair informed Members of another walk across City Gardens property on 15 August at 2:00pm.
- c) The Chair reported that considerations were undergoing to open up the area around St. Bride's Church for a Christmas concert in the Winter.
- d) It was also suggested by the Chair that there was a plan to open up a different City Garden space over a week in the Summer as part of the Destination City Programme.
- e) The Board considered how much the issue of human defecation was related to the lack of public toilets. Officers noted there were two fully staff public conveniences and a recommendation had been made at Port Heath & Environmental Services Committee to review signage to City and non-City toilets.
- f) Questions were raised as to why the Park Guard and not the Metropolitan Police were called to incidents of dogs off leads. Officers indicated that the Park Guard made continuous visits which allowed them to build relationships with dog walkers at Bunhill Fields
- g) Officers informed the Board that the vacant keeper position would be stationed at Bunhill Fields and considerations were being made to offer free dog training to dog walkers at Bunhill Fields.

- h) A member requested that the visit to Finsbury Circus on 11 September be in the afternoon.
- i) It was requested by a Board Member that a note on opening times of the public toilets be taken to Port Health and Environmental Services Committee. Officers confirmed they would and would share the report with Board Members.
- j) The Board considered whether restricting hours of dog walking would help. Officers responded that it would require a change in the byelaws; if working with dog owners through the new keeper did not work, Officers would look at PSPOs.

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11. QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

The Committee received an update on the Youth Natural Environment Board from Simon Lightman.

The Chair reminded the Board that the Natural Environment Board annual dinner was due to take place on 22 January 2025.

The Chair also informed Members that the Natural Environment Board away day was due to take place on 3 October 2024.

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

No other business was raised that the Chair considered urgent.

13. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

The Committee did not resolve to go into non-public session.

14. NON-PUBLIC QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

No non-public questions were raised relating to the work of the Board.

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

No other non-public business was considered which the Chair considered urgent.

The meeting ended at 12.32 pm

Chairman

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