

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT BOARD
Monday, 19 February 2024

Minutes of the meeting of the Natural Environment Board held at Committee Room -
2nd Floor West Wing, Guildhall on Monday, 19 February 2024 at 11.00 am

Present

Members:

Caroline Haines (Chair)
Andrew McMurtrie (Deputy Chairman)
Eamonn Mullally
Wendy Mead OBE
Oliver Sells KC
William Upton KC (Ex-Officio Member)

In Attendance:

Benjamin Murphy
Catherine Bickmore (Observing)
Paul Morris (Observing)

Officers:

Emily Brennan	- Environment Department
Anna Cowperthwaite	- Comptroller and City Solicitor's
Simon Glynn	- Environment Department
Clem Harcourt	- Chamberlain's Department
Joanne Hill	- Environment Department
William LoSasso	- Environment Department
Bob Roberts	- Environment Department
Joseph Smith	- Town Clerk's Department
Jack Joslin	- City Bridge Foundation
Pauline Mouskis	- Chamberlain's Department
Sally Gadsdon	- Environment Department
Maria Trayner	- Environment Department
Fiona McKeith	- City Surveyor's Department
Ian Hughes	- Environment Department
Jake Tibbets	- Environment Department
Jo Hurst	- Environment Department

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received by James St John David and Deputy Alpa Raja.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED – That, the minutes of the last meeting held on 4 December 2023 be approved by the board.

4. **DRAFT HIGH-LEVEL BUSINESS PLAN 2024/25 - ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT**

The board considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning, the Environment Department's draft high-level Business Plan 2024/25 for the Natural Environment Division and City Gardens.

Members noted that the plan covers the priority workstreams for the division, such as biodiversity, climate action, health and wellbeing, and income generation, and sits above the local site-specific plans that are reported to the relevant committees. Board Members had some questions and comments on the plan, especially regarding the role and involvement of the other committees that oversee the open spaces charities and the terms of reference of the Natural Environment Board.

The board agreed to approve the plan subject to any changes in the corporate plan and the development of the local site-specific plans. Members were informed that this would be reviewed it again in six months' time.

RESOLVED – That Members, approve, subject to the incorporation of any changes sought by the board, the draft high-level Business Plan 2024/25 for the Natural Environment Division and City Gardens (Included in Appendix A of the report).

5. **RISK MANAGEMENT UPDATE REPORT**

The Committee considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning, risk management procedures in place within the Environment Department are satisfactory and they meet the requirements of the Corporate Risk Management Framework and, where applicable, the Charities Act 2011.

Officers explained that the report was detailed and included the summary risk registers for City Gardens and the Natural Environment cross divisional risks. It was noted that the report was aligned with the natural environment strategies and that individual risks would be reported by exception in the quarterly reports.

RESOLVED – That, Members confirm, on behalf of the City Corporation as Trustee, that the Natural Environment Cross-Divisional Summary Risk Register (Included in Appendix 1 of the report) satisfactorily identifies the key top-level risks to the charities and that an appropriate risk management process is in place.

6. **CHARITIES & COMMERCIAL**

The board received a verbal update of the Interim Executive Director, Environment.

The Director of Natural environment gave a verbal update on the charity review and the progress made on the external appointments for the Natural Environment Board. The commercial manager also reported on the work done on the income strategy and the audit for the natural environment division.

The Chair thanked the Director and the manager for their updates and said that the charity review and the income strategy would be discussed further in the non-public session.

7. *** CLIMATE ACTION STRATEGY, COOL STREETS AND GREENING PROGRAMME - PHASE 4**

The board received a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning the climate action strategy, cool streets and greening programme.

The following points were noted.

- The Director of Natural Environment gave an overview of the strategy, which aims to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2040 and enhance the natural environment in the city.
- The Director of Natural Environment highlighted the key actions and targets for each of the five themes: energy, transport, waste, adaptation and resilience, and nature and green spaces.
- The Director of Natural Environment also explained the governance and monitoring arrangements for the strategy and the next steps for consultation and approval.
- Several members expressed their support for the strategy and praised the work of the officers.
- Some members raised questions and suggestions on specific aspects of the strategy, such as the carbon budget, the engagement with stakeholders, the alignment with other strategies, and the potential for innovation and collaboration.
- The Director of Natural Environment responded to the questions and suggestions and noted the feedback for further consideration.

8. *** OPERATIONAL FINANCE PROGRESS REPORT (PERIOD 9 APRIL - DECEMBER 2023) 2023/24 - NATURAL ENVIRONMENT DIVISION**

The board received a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning operation the operation finance progress for the period 9 April – December 2023.

The following points were noted.

- The report showed that the division had a net overspend of £1.2 million, mainly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on income generation and increased costs of maintenance and security.
- Officers highlighted the measures taken to mitigate the financial pressures, such as reducing discretionary expenditure, applying for government grants, and reviewing the charging policy for events and activities.
- The board noted the financial challenges and risks facing the division and the need to explore new sources of income and funding, as well as to align the budgets with the natural environment strategies and the corporate plan.

- The board also noted the progress made on the capital projects, such as the Tower Hill Gardens redevelopment, the Finsbury Circus restoration, and the Bunhill Fields dog control scheme.
- The board thanked the environment division for their hard work and resilience in delivering the services and projects under difficult circumstances.

9. * **NATURAL CAPITAL AUDIT**

The board received a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning the Natural Capital Audit.

The following points were noted.

- Officers gave a brief overview of the audit, which assessed the value of the natural assets and ecosystem services provided by the city's open spaces.
- Officers highlighted some of the key findings, such as the carbon sequestration, air quality improvement, health and well-being benefits, and biodiversity enhancement.
- It was also mentioned some of the challenges and limitations of the audit, such as the data availability, the valuation methods, and the uncertainty and variability of the results.
- Officers noted that the audit was a baseline for measuring progress and informing decision making, and that it would be updated regularly.
- The Deputy Chair praised the audit and asked about the implications for the natural environment strategies and the climate action plan.
- Officers answered noting that the audit supported the objectives and actions of the strategies and the plan, and that it would help to prioritise and monitor the interventions. It was also mentioned that the audit would help to communicate the value of the open spaces to the public and the stakeholders.

10. **DOG CONTROL WITHIN CITY GARDENS**

The board considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning challenges in City Gardens due to increased dog presence. Incidents, including safety concerns and antisocial behaviour.

The board considered the report on the options for controlling dogs within city gardens, especially Bunhill Fields, following previous requests from Members. Members noted that the recommended creation of a new keeper role to be based at Bunhill Fields, who would have enforcement powers and build relationships with dog owners. Members also noted the recommendation for ongoing monitoring of the situation and exploring the possibility of public space protection orders in the future.

The board approved the recommendations, with the proviso that the resourcing level and the effectiveness of the keeper role would be reviewed within the first year.

RESOLVED – That Members,

- a) Endorse the creation of a new City Gardens Keeper role to enforce byelaws and legislation across the City Gardens sites, with an initial focus on Bunhill Fields.
- b) Endorse the exploration of PSPOs and use of enforcement powers across the City Garden sites to improve user experience.

11. **2024/25 EVENTS FEES AND CHARGES - CITY GARDENS**

The board considered a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning proposes that charges for corporate events that are held in City Gardens sites are increased by 4.1% for the start of the 2024/25 financial year.

Officers explained that the fees and charges were based on benchmarking with other local authorities and market research and aimed to balance income generation with accessibility and affordability for event organisers and attendees. It was also highlighted that the challenges and uncertainties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on the events industry and proposed a flexible and pragmatic approach to event bookings and cancellations.

The board welcomed the report and approved the proposed fees and charges, subject to any changes in the corporate plan or the budget process.

RESOLVED – That Members, approve the proposed 2024/25 fees and charges as set out in Appendix 1 of the report.

12. *** CITY GARDENS UPDATE**

The board received a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning an update to Members of the Open Spaces & City Gardens Committee on current management and operational activities across the City Gardens.

The following points were noted.

- It was noted that the team has recently taken on four new gardening apprentices and a new business apprentice and was planning to recruit three new frontline members of staff and an additional shift worker. The team is also working on several contracts for tree work, bedding, electric vehicles, and vibration monitoring system.
- The Biodiversity Partnership Group is being resurrected and will meet in February to help meet the targets of the Biodiversity Action Plan.
- A landscape architect company had been commissioned to deliver a master plan for Tower Hill Gardens, based on public consultation, and the final plan will be presented to the board in May.
- The team is collaborating with the Destination City team to review and refresh the self-guided walks and tours across the city gardens.
- The team is working closely with the Friends of City Gardens, who are going through a transitional period, to review roles and responsibilities, establish a terms of reference document, and expand the offer for corporate volunteering.

- The team has delivered or will deliver several projects in the next six weeks, such as tree planting, bulb planting, hedge laying, and wildflower meadow creation.

13. * **KING GEORGE'S FIELD-CITY OF LONDON TRUSTEE'S ANNUAL REPORT AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2023**

The board received a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning the annual report and financial statements for King George's Field-City of London Trustee for the year ended 31 March 2023.

The following points were noted.

- The board received the annual report and financial statements for King George's Field-City of London Trustee for the year ended 31 March 2023, which showed a surplus of £12,000 and a total fund balance of £1.2 million.
- The board noted the achievements of the trust in providing recreational facilities and activities for the local community, such as the installation of new play equipment, the refurbishment of the pavilion, and the hosting of various events and sports clubs.
- The board also noted the challenges faced by the trust due to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the closure of the facilities for several months, the loss of income from bookings and rentals, and the increased costs of cleaning and maintenance.
- The board thanked the trust staff and volunteers for their hard work and resilience during the difficult period.

14. * **DECISIONS TAKEN UNDER DELEGATED AUTHORITY OR URGENCY POWERS**

The board received a report of the Interim Executive Director, Environment concerning a decision taken by the Town Clerk under delegated authority.

The following points were noted.

- The board noted the decision taken by the Town Clerk under delegated authority to approve the wording of the terms of reference for the Natural Environment Board, as set out in the report.
- The board was informed that the wording was subsequently amended by the Court of Common Council, and that only the changes to the composition of the board were agreed.
- The board was also informed that the other aspects of the terms of reference, such as the frequency of meetings and the relationship with other committees, were subject to further discussion and clarification.

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

There were no questions.

16. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT AND WHICH THE COMMITTEE AGREE SHOULD BE CONSIDERED**
There was no urgent business.
17. **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.
18. **NON-PUBLIC MINUTES**
RESOLVED – That, the non-public of the last meeting held on 4 December 2023 be approved by the board.
19. *** CORPORATE CHARITIES REVIEW SCOPING EXERCISE TO SUPPORT THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT CHARITIES REVIEW**
The board received a joint report of the Managing Director City Bridge Foundation and Interim Executive Director, Environment.
20. **QUESTIONS ON MATTERS RELATING TO THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE**
There were no questions.
21. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS URGENT AND WHICH THE COMMITTEE AGREE SHOULD BE CONSIDERED WHILST THE PUBLIC ARE EXCLUDED**
There was no other business.
22. **NATURAL ENVIRONMENT STAFFING**
The board considered a report of the Interim Executive Director.

The meeting ended at 12.49 pm

Chairman

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