

MEETING OF
THE COTSWOLDS CONSERVATION BOARD

HELD VIRTUALLY VIA ZOOM MEETINGS

WEDNESDAY 24 MARCH 2021 (9:15am)

Present:

Brendan McCarthy (Chairman)	Rebecca Charley (Vice-Chair)
Garry King	Ben Dent
David Broad	Cate Le-Grice Mack
Nicholas Bumford	Charles Mathew
Phil Chapman	John Matthews
David Kerr	Liz Eyre*
Paul Crossley	Dom Morris
Ben Stokes	Liz Hodges
Amanda Davis	Graham Hopkins
Ed Macalister-Smith	Jo Barker
Shaun Parsons	Adrian Hardman
John Swanton	Matt Darby*
Steve Harvey	Sarah Whalley-Hoggins
Brendan Costelloe**	Tony Merry
Clive Webster	Sue Crawford

*Liz Eyre and Matt Darby left the meeting early due to other commitments

**Brendan Costelloe joined the meeting at 10:30am

Also in Attendance:

Andy Parsons (Chief Executive)
Ann Wyatt (Head of Finance)
John Mills (Planning and Landscape Lead)
Ed Bonn (Rural Skills Officer)
James Webb (Partnerships and Fundraising Lead)
Margaret Reid (Head Warden, Cotswolds Voluntary Wardens)
Mandy Pressland (Office Manager) – observing
Richard Aylard (Sustainability Director at Thames Water) – until 10:00am

THAMES WATER – PRESENTATION (9:15am-10:00am)

- Following concerns from Board Members raised at a previous Board meeting, Richard Aylard, Sustainability Director at Thames Water, gave an informative presentation titled *“Why is untreated sewerage being discharged into rivers and what are we doing about it?”*
- The presentation gave the Board a clear picture of the issues and Thames Water’s improvement plans. It was followed by a Q&A session with various Board Members raising their concerns about the current situation, especially on the Evenlode and Windrush catchments.
- It was also acknowledged and accepted that the issue of river quality goes beyond the Thames Water catchment.
- Actions Arising – the Chief Executive will forward the presentation and contact details for Richard Aylard to all Board Members.

MAIN BOARD MEETING

1. INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

- Apologies - apologies were received from George Lambrick, Mike Dean, Mollie Groom and Norman Kay.
- Introductions and announcements – the Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. He thanked Nigel Colston, who is leaving the Board at the end of March, for his dedicated service as West Oxfordshire District Council's Board Member. Nigel has gone above and beyond over many years and his skills, expertise and manner will be greatly missed. The Chairman then reminded Members about their responsibilities in completing administrative requirements, i.e. governance forms and questionnaires, and gave an update on the recruitment for new Secretary of State Members – commenting on the significant improvement in Defra's approach to the process.
- Declarations of interest – Matt Darby declared a potential conflict of interest related to items 9 and 10.
- Public questions - there were no public questions.

2. MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING – 9 DECEMBER 2020

- Decision - resolved that the Minutes of the Meeting of the Board Meeting held on 9 December 2020 be approved as a correct record.
- Matters Arising – The actions arising were confirmed as either complete or in progress with the exception of those relating to Safeguarding which will be carried forward. Mark Connelly resent his presentation on the Agricultural Transition Plan and responded to the concerns about the use of plastic materials, i.e. pots and tree guards, for the Ourboretum project.

3. MINUTES OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE - 24 FEBRUARY 2021

The Board noted the Minutes of the Meeting held on 24 February 2021.

4. REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

The Chief Executive (CE) presented a review of key actions since the last meeting and also set out priorities for the meeting. In addition, he gave an update on the Kingfisher Trail and recent recruitment of a Trails and Access Officer, primarily focusing on the Bathscapes project and the Cotswold Way National Trail.

- Comments – none.
- Decision – resolved that the Board notes the report.
- Actions Arising – none.

5. Q2 FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONAL REVIEW

The Head of Finance (HoF) gave an overview of the current financial position, praising the team's efforts throughout the year to ensure a strong performance in such uncertain times.

- Comments – Rebecca Charley commented that the financial performance is impressive. The Chairman was encouraged by the new partnerships being formed. Ed Macalister-Smith was delighted that the Gateways project was, at last, largely completed and that Rebecca Jones should be congratulated on her efforts and determination over a long period of time, all agreed.
- Decision - resolved that the Board notes the financial position.
- Actions Arising – none.

6. BUSINESS PLANNING

The CE and HoF introduced the Work Programme and Budget for 2021/22, starting with an apology for the lateness of the papers being circulated. The HoF explained that the budget had taken longer than normal due to the level of detail and the fact that it had to be built up from the bottom rather than relying on previous year's performance due to Covid-19. There are also three areas of the budget which remain unconfirmed: Cotswold Way and Glorious Cotswold Grasslands (both minor) and Farming in Protected Landscapes (likely to have a significant impact but timescales and level of funding unknown).

- Comments – Amanda Davis asked if some thought could be given to the presentation of the Work Programme to make it easier to read. Ed Macalister-Smith expressed his support of the Work Programme. Phil Chapman commented that all budgets are based on assumptions and this should be fully backed, with Charles Mathew adding that the team has done a fantastic job and a budget 'lays down a measure'.
- Decision – resolved that the Board approves the Work Programme and Revenue Budget for 2021/22, subject to the CE/HoF informing the Chairman of any adverse impacts (in excess of £1,000) as the outstanding items are finalised.
- Actions Arising – none.

7. WORKING AND STEERING GROUPS 2021/22

The CE presented the paper, recommending which Working and Steering Groups should continue into 2021/22. He also supported the HoF's recommendation that a new Finance and Audit Sub-Committee should be formed.

- Comments – there was support for a Finance and Audit Sub-Committee to be formed. One of the significant benefits would be the 'freeing up' of time at Executive Committee and Board Meetings to discuss strategic matters relating to the National Landscape. Rebecca Charley said that these groups give an opportunity for other Members to use their skills. Cate Le Grice-Mack reminded the Board that climate change must remain central to our work. Brendan Costelloe suggested a potential need for a focus on sustainable tourism and nature. Clive Webster asked how the priorities for each group are agreed, to which the Chairman informed the Board that these priorities would be made available ahead of the AGM in June, to give Board Members an opportunity to comment and to assess whether they would like to put themselves forward.
- Decision - resolved that the Board approves the Working and Steering Groups for 2021/22 and that a new Finance and Audit Sub-Committee be formed.
- Actions Arising – (a) HoF to liaise with the Chairman regarding the Finance and Audit Sub-Committee, (b) CE to circulate the 'key priorities' of each Working Group ahead of the AGM.

8. EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK

The Chairman stated that this was an excellent piece of work and acknowledged Publica's support and expertise in the process. He asked if there were any comments from Board Members.

- Comments – none.
- Decision – resolved that the Board adopts the Employee Handbook.
- Actions Arising – none.

9. LANDSCAPE-LED DEVELOPMENT POSITION STATEMENT

John Mills, Planning and Landscape Lead, introduced the paper and explained that this position paper and the one in Item 10 had been revised following feedback from the consultation. He also acknowledged the support of the Planning and Infrastructure Working Group throughout the process.

- Comments – there was a lot of positive discussion, including significant contributions from Clive Webster (highlighting different roles and remits), Ed Macalister-Smith (monitoring), David Broad (liaising with local authority forward planning teams), Graham Hopkins (understanding the hierarchy of our documents), Phil Chapman (helps to demonstrate that we are listed to), Cate Le Grice-Mack (referring to the government position about National Landscapes being unsuitable areas to meet unmet needs), Liz Hodges (the position should be 'fluid' over time) and the CE (influencing and collaboration). Everyone agreed that this is a quality piece of work and the Board should be confident in standing behind it.
- Decision – resolved that the Board adopts the Landscape-Led Development Position Statement.
- Actions Arising – (a) provide clarity on how and when the position statement will be reviewed and updated, (b) give consideration to how the Board monitors development decisions within the National Landscape to help demonstrate the effectiveness of the position statement in supporting Local Planning Authority decision-making.

10. HOUSING POSITION STATEMENT

The Planning and Landscape Lead introduced the paper which, again, generated good debate amongst members.

- Comments – significant contributions from Clive Webster (National Landscape boundary v. LPA boundaries can cause issues), David Broad (definition of affordable housing), Tony Merry (need v. requirement), Ben Stokes (risk of speculative development).
- Decision – resolved that the Board adopts the Housing Position Statement.
- Actions Arising – review wording to address the risk of speculative development proposals.

11. EXTERNAL AUDIT REPORT 2019/20

This paper was presented by the HoF and the Chairman.

- Comments – none.
- Decision – resolved that the Board notes the External Audit Report for 2019/20.

- Actions Arising – none.

12. COUNTER FRAUD AND CORRUPTION POLICY

This paper was presented by the HoF and the Chairman.

- Comments – none.
- Decision - resolved that the Board adopts the revised Counter Fraud and Corruption Policy.
- Actions Arising – none.

13. BOARD EFFECTIVENESS QUESTIONNAIRE

The Chairman commented that this has been an insightful and very useful exercise which the Board should come back to over time, as we look to continuously improve what we do and how we do it.

- Comments – Ben Stokes thought it was very encouraging that responses indicated a real motivation from Members to do more and increase their own levels of engagement.
- Decision - resolved that the Board notes the paper and to discuss it in more detail at a future meeting.
- Actions Arising – none.

14. RURAL SKILLS PRESENTATION

Ed Bonn, Rural Skills Officer, gave a fantastic presentation on the Rural Skills programme, which included detail on its history; scope; financial performance; future ambitions, culminating in a new 3-Year Business Plan Framework for Rural Skills.

- Comments – The Chairman started the discussion by saying how ‘uplifting’ the presentation had been. Cate Le Grice-Mack congratulated Ed Bonn and said that Rural Skills should be seen as a ‘value-add’ for our work. Graham Hopkins asked whether we could think about expanding the breadth of the programme to include, for example, social inclusion. Liz Hodges suggested contacting Tourist Information Centres as a way of promoting courses, as well as involving schools. Amanda Davis suggested that there should be a link with the new Health, Wellbeing and Social Inclusion Working Group. Tony Merry commented on the skills development side of the programme which leads to future employment. The CE praised the support given to Ed by his new line manager, James Webb, and in particular the focus on developing a better understanding of profitability, so that, over time, commercial elements of the programme can subsidise more outreach/ educational work. The short-term focus must be to ensure the financial sustainability of the programme. The Chairman concluded by saying that Rural Skills must be centre to what we do.
- Decision - resolved that the Board notes the presentation and that the Rural Skills Officer should be congratulated for all his efforts.
- Actions Arising – none

15. EXTERNAL BIDS

James Webb presented the paper, highlighting the exciting new Strategic Partnership with Severn Trent Water.

- Comments – none.
- Decision - resolved that the Board notes the current External Bids.
- Actions Arising – none.

16. FORWARD PLANNING

The Board Members noted the draft agenda for May's Executive Committee meeting.

17. OTHER BUSINESS

- Charles Mathew (Oxfordshire County Council) and David Kerr (Nettleton Parish Council) both informed the Board that they wouldn't be standing at the upcoming May elections and so will be stepping down as Board Members at that point. The Chairman, on behalf of everyone, thanked them both for their fantastic contributions to the Board's work over many years.
- Nick Bumford mentioned the series of Farming Forum webinars, hosted by Cotswolds National Landscape, as a great example of widening our engagement with farmers and land managers. Nick chaired some of the sessions. He praised, in particular, the organisation of both Scott Brown and Mark Connelly.
- Dom Morris thanked the CE for organising the Thames Water presentation and is keen for the Board to continue their involvement in river quality issues within the National Landscape. This was supported by John Matthews.
- Clive Webster updated the Board on Cotswold District Council's position and action on creating roadside bunds (as a way of deterring rural crime) and asked all Members to co-ordinate any responses if they become aware of this activity. The issue is known to be wider than Cirencester.
- The Chairman informed the Board of the CE's upcoming appearance on Countryfile this Sunday (28th).
- Graham Hopkins informed the Board about a recent lecture given by Adam Henson titled "The Future for Rural Gloucestershire" sponsored by the Honourable Company of Gloucestershire and CPRE Gloucestershire - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPOb-2S_F7o

18. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 22 June, 10.00am to 1.00pm, followed by the Annual General Meeting.
Location to be confirmed.

The main Board Meeting commenced at 10.05am and closed at 1.05pm

Chairman