



SBIS BOARD MEETING MINUTES

Microsoft Teams online meeting

24th June 2020

Present

Desi Reed (DR) - Chair	East Suffolk Council	Helen Jacobs (HJ)	Essex & Suffolk Water
Simone Bullion (SBu)	Suffolk Wildlife Trust	Jane Mason (JMa)	SBIS
Adrian Chalkley (AC)	Suffolk Naturalists' Society	Sally Minns (SM)	Ipswich Borough Council (IBC)
Holly Emmens (HE)	Suffolk County Council (SCC)	Martin Sanford (MS)	SBIS
Peter Garrett (PG)	Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils (BMSDC)	Gary Quilter (GQ)	West Suffolk Council
Tim De-Keyzer (TDK)	SCC	Chris Strachan (CS)	Environment Agency
Jacqui Miller (JM)	RSPB		

Apologies: Sarah Barker (SBa) IBC, Andrew Murray-Wood (AM-W) SCC, John Jackson (JJ) Natural England

1. Apologies and Introductions

Everyone introduced themselves in this new format of meeting under such strange circumstances (the COVID-19 restrictions). MS: Kate Riddington has left Ipswich Museum to work at the House of Commons Archives. SM: Sally Minns, Head of Planning Policy at IBC, will now be attending instead of Planning Policy team leader SBa due to heavy demands on Sarah's time.

2. Minutes of the last meeting (2nd April 2019 Attachment A)

The minutes were agreed to be an accurate record of the meeting.

Matters arising

- ALL actions complete

3. SBIS Update

East Anglian Planning and Biodiversity Seminar 2019

This was held on 14th November and went very well. PDFs of the presentations to view on ISSUU or download are available on the [Planners' Page](#) of the SBIS website and it was agreed that these provide a useful resource.

Action: SBU to upload the 'Otters and Planning' presentation PDF.

Suffolk Naturalists' Society (SNS) Conference 2020 – 'On the Verge of Success'

The theme of the Conference was Roadside Nature Reserves. Held on 29th February, it was very successful. PDFs of the presentations to view on ISSUU or download are available via the SBIS website [here](#). YouTube videos of presentations are being uploaded by Ben Heather to the SNS YouTube channel – links can be found on the SNS website [here](#).

MS noted that due to COVID-19 restrictions, making use of on-line resources such as YouTube is the way forward for communication.

Data updates

The 6-monthly Protected Species, County Wildlife Sites and other GIS layers were released via the SBIS website at the beginning of June.

Local Environmental Record Centres (LERCs) are supplying Anglian Water with 6-monthly GIS data updates under a 5-year contract, for which SBIS are paid £4250/year. The data is required in a different format from that for the Environment Agency, necessitating processing of both. Both organisations were updated with the data at the end of May.

IT

The SBIS server at Ipswich Museum was replaced with a new, small box which is working very well unattended, connected to users via SCC's Direct Access. Since mid-March, the team has been homeworking because of the COVID-19 crisis, necessitating new ways of working. Connection speeds over the SCC network are slow, so JMa invested time in providing local copies of the search data to MS and Andy Mercer. This greatly speeds up data use. Microsoft Teams and OneDrive can be used via Office 365 for uploading and downloading data updates for team members and can also be accessed via a web browser to minimise usage of the SCC network.

Commercial data enquiries

Although in April and May the number of enquiries fell below average, June has seen a big increase and the service is very busy. Carrying out searches from home is working very well.

Personnel

GB retired at the end of February, but as she is still working part-time for the Orchards East project she continues to keep in touch. Following Gen's departure there is a staff vacancy, providing an opportunity to see where the gaps in SBIS services are.

Suffolk Ponds Group

MS attended the first meeting of core partners for the new Suffolk Ponds Group, which will mirror the Norfolk Ponds Group. It dealt with its creation, a presentation and District Level Licensing for Great Crested Newts. The group should be a driver for conservation.

Other

MS: Kate Riddington was the former Curator of Natural History at Ipswich Museum and was very helpful. She will be missed, and SBIS will now have less access to the Museum's natural history collections.

AC: has heard from the Museum that volunteering will continue. This should work well and the collections can continue.

TDK: asked if SBIS had heard from NE about their level of engagement.

MS: JJ was invited but didn't reply.

4. Progress on The Hold

MS: the builders were off site for 4 weeks but are now back, with restrictions for COVID-19. The building will be handed over to SCC in mid-July followed by fitting out, IT installation and moving in. A removals firm was booked to move SBIS in July, but this had to be cancelled and removal dates are now not available. The University area, where there is a lecture theatre, will open on 28th September so the Hold needs to be useable by then. SBIS will not be moving in until September at the earliest.

SBU: will fitting out have to be modified? MS didn't know, but homeworking is working well and we can see how things go in July.

TDK: September is an optimistic moving date. SCC has to assess all its office spaces under changing advice. Buildings are only able to go to 20-25% occupancy so space in The Hold will be reduced. There is a team working through the guidance and assessing to what extent staff can work without going into the office. SCC staff will be working from home possibly until the new year, and maybe even longer.

PG: the same applies to BMSDC – staff can only enter Endeavour House to use, for example, large items of equipment.

DR & SM: it is the same for East Suffolk and IBC

MS: homeworking is not the ideal situation as working from local copies of the data is a messy solution. The problem is the high demand on computing power for data processing and GIS.

JMa: homeworke licences for the useful GIS software FME may also cease in the autumn.

DR: GIS is a problem for homeworking at East Suffolk too.

TDK: can seek approval for access to corporate buildings. Access to Ipswich Museum will need to be arranged with IBC.

SM: at IBC there is no problem with GIS, IT access or the network. They do have a web GIS.

5. Budget

MS shared the Draft Budget 2020-2021 and Consultancy Income 2009-2020 spreadsheets using Microsoft Teams.

Expenditure last year was down on the predicted £125 k as half the County Wildlife Site citation re-writes were paid from this year's budget.

Consultancy income 2019-2020 at £41.5 k was down against the predicted income of £45 k for the year and on the previous year's £45.8 k. The Orchards East work has not yet been invoiced (£4 k). There is a large reserve of over £99 k to be used for shortfalls.

The total predicted income for the year, including Local Authority contributions, is £116.2 k and predicted expenditure £121.8 k.

TDK: this is a predicted budget, hosted by SCC, and shortfalls roll forward to the next year. Staff costs are uncertain as they depend on the start date for Gen Broad's replacement.

JMa: there is an additional £6 k expected from Orchards East for completion of transferring the Suffolk Traditional Orchards Group data into the Orchards East database and digitising the GIS polygons.

MS: although consultancy income was down on the previous year it is rising steeply this year.

TDK asked if the salary includes the cost of living award.

MS: it doesn't as we are waiting for the new post to be filled.

TDK: do we know why the number of searches were down last year?

MS: possibly due to Brexit uncertainty?

HJ: the Essex & Suffolk Water contribution to the Suffolk Biodiversity Project Fund isn't shown, but they will be unable to contribute in the future.

MS: there is still £8000 which has not been spent from the Fund. Gen Broad tried to encourage people to apply for funding, but only equipment for the Bat Group was purchased.

HJ: the money will be diverted into their biodiversity fund.

TDK: is there scope to use some money to support the Suffolk Ponds Group?

MS said there was.

HJ: agreed and asked if it could also be used for the County Wildlife Site re-writes? Essex & Suffolk Water's contribution has no strings attached and is solely to support biodiversity work.

SM: IBC has been asked to contribute to Great Crested Newt work, including providing staff and mapping.

6. Communications Officer

MS: after Gen Broad's retirement the vacant post is being revised to become a full-time Communications role. Website programming skills are needed for creating interactive web features and web integration, with preferably an awareness of Drupal content management software. The Planning and Biodiversity support work is to be retained.

TDK: it needs to be degree-level, but Environmental Science might be restrictive – Communications skills are more important.

MS: will reflect this in the advertisement. Advertising is being delayed during the Covid-19 crisis as it would be too difficult for a new starter to work immediately from home.

SM: the University of Suffolk, in media and technology, might be a good place to look for candidates.

Discussion on delaying recruitment for the Communications role:

TDK: recruitment is continuing in other areas.

MS: the post is key to where SBIS should be in the future and asked for the opinions of others.

SBu: given the time taken for recruitment, it would be autumn anyway.

DR: students are now looking for jobs.

The Board agreed to press ahead with recruitment now.

7. Business Plan – where do we want to be in 5 years' time?

SM: SBIS is unique in providing the service that it does and in the data that it can share. The Business Plan needs to build in flexibility to be able to adapt to the new legislation expected under a new government.

SBu: the role of the planning system and ecological networks is an area of work which needs to progress and in Suffolk we are getting behind compared with other authorities.

TDK agreed and is happy to support the Business Plan work. A value of the Service is that it is available to both public and private sectors. Its monetary value will increase and we need to make sure it reflects what people pay. Parts of the planning process such as Biodiversity Net Gain need to draw on good quality data and analysis. SBIS is in a strong position to build on that and be resilient in the face of difficult times ahead. The real cost of the current crisis is still to be realised and we can't assume that public bodies can continue to underwrite the cost of running SBIS. Therefore, a plan is needed which can respond to potential challenges. It is right to refocus Gen's role as it will help SBIS to reach a market, and now is the time to do it.

PG: agreed. BMSDC are developing plans for climate change and biodiversity, and a Biodiversity Task Group has been formed. There is concern that the draft climate change biodiversity

strategy is weak. A more joined-up response is needed to Biodiversity Net Gain and the Environment Bill.

MS: 50% of income is from consultants but not sure if the contribution from local authorities will increase. Flexibility is the key.

DR: the East Suffolk Strategic Plan is climate change focused. 40 new wild area sites, mainly verges and open spaces with altered mowing regimes, have been created.

Discussion on how similar plans will grow, including at Parish Council level, and how these can best work together with SBIS input. Consideration of this should be included in the Business Plan.

PG & SM: more co-ordination is needed and SBIS Board can be the channel for this. Other authorities have been managing verges differently for years so there is a need to find best practice around the country and use it to help decide the focus for the Business Plan.

SM: need to look at market potential. Grant aid, such as that from Environment Agency, is available and we could take advantage of schemes such as Ipswich's air pollution reduction scheme. Most authorities have grant aid officers. Companies such as the Co-op may give grants. These could all be built on. The Business Plan needs to look forward to the short, medium and long terms.

AC: is there a role for the Communications Officer in education? And to help steer parts of regulation? Should SBIS try to attract an income stream from this? Or does this complicate the role further?

MS: education is interesting and is one of the existing aims. Regarding policy, SBIS is apolitical. East Suffolk's 'wild areas' were well received and lockdown has increased the number of "armchair naturalists", with more recorders being recruited. The country-wide increase in interest in verges could be tapped into. It would have been very good if East Suffolk had contacted SBIS, and we would like them to share the GIS data, but it was excellent that they took a lead.

Any Business Plan has to be founded on a clear vision and not have mission-creep. It should focus on the core business of SBIS and make sure it does that to the best of its ability. Therefore, how can MS be best supported, and what should the deadline be?

DR: the focus should be on communicating and understanding the work of SBIS, so the Communications Officer will help SBIS to move forward.

MS: support for a Working Group would help to focus thoughts. The Plan could be for the 5 years from April 2021. When the Minutes are sent there will be a reminder.

SM: IBC cannot be involved because their examination starts in September.

MS: the ideas from today are enough to enable him to go to HR to think about advertising the Communications Officer role.

Action: MS to send reminder for ideas and support for Working Group with the Minutes.

Action: All - send feedback on Business Plan ideas and involvement in the Working Group by Friday 24th July.

8. [County Wildlife Sites](#) re-survey and rewrites

SBu: re-writes are being undertaken in two halves.

With many sites having been designated nearly 30 years ago, their citations need updating. This includes the style which needs now to be less emotive and less time-specific. A traffic-light system of Red, Amber and Green is being used to prioritise sites.

Update on progress:

The target was to re-write 100 of the most important sites and as many of the others as possible, with some requiring visits.

154 re-writes have been completed out of a total of 942 CWS. 57 of these were style changes only. 97 visits were carried out – 35 by Tracey Housley, 46 by others in the group, 16 by volunteers.

East Suffolk asked SWT to visit 46 for the Local Plan but, due to the lateness of the season, 14 were visited leaving 32 remaining, some of which are being visited now. The season varies according to habitat.

There can be problems with access, and finding landowners for all sites to be visited is a challenge.

SBu asked MS if SBIS could support Tracey for 45 days of her time, match-funded by SWT, this was agreed.

The original proposal in February was to roll forward 100 red and 100 amber with the intention of completing them. However, Tracey has been furloughed due to the Covid-19 crisis. Surveys are continuing but there will be no re-writes until Tracey returns, hopefully later in the year.

SBu sent a SWT invoice to SBIS for half the agreed sum.

Discussion can continue at Panel Meetings, with the use of OneNote.

Action: MS to check with SCC Finance to see if this has been paid.

PG left the meeting.

9. Woodland Surveys and Potential New CWS

SBu: Alison Looser has been very excited by the woodland flora found. Last year her work led to thousands of new records and the designation of 5 new sites. The sites were those appearing on Natural England's Ancient Woodland Inventory, which now includes those <2ha in area and which are proving to be very good. The sites had not been surveyed in 30 years.

However, due to the COVID-19 crisis, the work on Otley Gull has not been possible and surveying has not been able to progress methodically, although some has been done informally. Alison has around 25 sites to survey

MS: 25 is as much as could be expected from one person in a season. Surveying needs to be rolled over to next spring and an idea of costs will be needed.

TDK left the meeting.

10. Ecological Networking, Biodiversity Net Gain, District Level Licensing

MS: Webinars were attended in all these areas:

- Natural England – 13th November 2019

National Biodiversity Climate Change Vulnerability Model

This tool uses in-house software which NE can share after further webinar training.

The research report is available from

<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5069081749225472>

Natural England Habitat Networks Model

This model uses FME software. NE will share the FME workspace once finalised. The resulting datasets have been downloaded from <https://naturalengland-defra.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/habitat-networks-combined-habitats-england> and mapped.

- Ecosystems Knowledge Network – 28th November 2019

Condatis Tool

The recording and video of the PowerPoint slides of the webinar 'Introducing the Condatis Tool to Enhance Habitat Networks' is available in the EKN [Webinar Library](#).

An Ecological Network sub-group meeting was held on 30th January. Following this Sam Hanks (SWT Farmland Wildlife Adviser) provided information about processes used by other organisations, and suggestions for contractors.

The University of East Anglia made a request to MS for Breckland species data and ecological networking information. They are looking at how to model and analyse data, and SBIS can learn from this.

JMa: is an Ecological Networking post to be created?

MS: no – TDK had a specification for employing an outside consultancy.

JM left the meeting.

SM: the Planning and Biodiversity Group work fell to a small number of people, and SBa will no longer have much time for it.

MS: the annual seminar could be conducted virtually for the c.200 attendees, free of charge.

SM: due to health issues she may have to be off work for a while but a plan needs approving by the end of the financial year. SBa will be sad not to be involved, but will still be able to attend meetings.

SBu: it would be very valuable if she could – the next meeting is 28th July.

11. AOB

None.

12. Date of next meeting

Action: MS to set up a Doodle poll to decide the next date.