

Report title	SANG Infrastructure
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Department	Community Services
Exempt	No

Purpose of report:
For Information

Synopsis of report:
Runnymede Borough Council manages six Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs), which are sites originally owned and managed by the Council that were given additional funding to encourage visitors from accessing the Special Protection Area. Those sites now carry a risk given their lack of necessary infrastructure to be considered an effective SANG.

Recommendation(s):
None. This report is for information.

1. Context and background of report

1.1 Runnymede Borough Council has six Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs). These are open spaces in Borough management which act as mitigation for the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA) from new residential development. It should be noted that an existing open space with public access can be enhanced to become a SANG site. This was the approach adopted by the Council in identifying six of its existing open spaces as being suitable for such enhancement.

1.2 In this area, the SPA is Chobham Common, containing habitat vital for the survival of ground nesting birds such as nightjars, woodlarks and Dartford warblers. The aim of SANGs is to divert visitors away from the SPA and potentially disturbing the breeding birds.

1.3 Developments coming forward in the Borough are charged SANG contributions if SANGs are not provided on-site. These contributions aid the management of the six SANGs and should supplement the management over the course of 125 years. The following are the locations of the SANGs in Runnymede:

- Chertsey Meads, Mead Lane, Chertsey Riverside.
- Hare Hill, Hare Hill, Ottershaw
- Homewood Park, Stonehill Road, Ottershaw

- Ether Hill/Queenswood, Fox Hills Road, Ottershaw
- St Ann's Hill, St Ann's Hill Road, Chertsey St Ann's
- Timber Hill and Ottershaw Chase, Guildford Road, Ottershaw

- 1.4 Each SANG should have a level of infrastructure designed to encourage visitors and aid their ability to enjoy the site. Such infrastructure should include car parks, waymarked paths and interpretation.
- 1.5 When a SANG has a car park, it can be mitigation for developments up to 4km from the boundary of the site, but when one is not present then this distance is reduced to 400m. SANGs should also have an accessible route around them between 2.2 and 2.5km in length. This is predominantly for walking but can be for other modes of transport such as cycling. Ideally, paths should be surfaced for maximum accessibility but if the path is accessible year-round then this can include mown walkways through grass for example.
- 1.6 Site entrances should be marked and include interpretation such as maps, things to see and general visitor information. All the aforementioned is designed to increase visitor experience and therefore encourage people away from recreating on the SPA.
- 1.7 Each SANG should also have a specific management plan approved by Natural England to identify enhancement needs mentioned above. These management plans should set out expenditure to maintain them in perpetuity (125 years). Only objectives identified in the plans that are approved by Natural England are allowed expenditure to be made against them drawn from the funds provided by developers. This is because SANGs are supposed to include the infrastructure mentioned previously that might not usually be present on other Green Spaces. This is what is meant when one talks about enhancing an existing open space to serve as a SANG.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

- 2.1 As presented to this Committee in June 2023, currently only one of the six SANGs managed by the Council has a full management plan (Chertsey Meads). However, the Chertsey Meads management plan needs to be updated to reflect the work completed on site. The other sites all have ecological management plans, written by Surrey Wildlife Trust, but now need to be incorporated into revised full plans.
- 2.2 It was previously agreed with CLT and presented to Community Services Committee that the Open Space Development team would lead this work as a priority. This priority was not only to ensure compliance against the requirements for SANG, but also to ensure that appropriate controls could be applied against existing SANG budgets.
- 2.3 Having undertaken an initial audit of each of the SANG sites, the table below summarises the areas of work identified to ensure full compliance, which would be reflected in the forthcoming site management plans:

Table 1: SANG Works Required

Site	Work Requirements
Chertsey Meads	Footpath waymarking
	Reduction in path flooding
	Grassland management review

	Sculpture Installation
	Interpretation
Hare Hill	Confirmation of parking arrangements
	Circular route/footpath waymarking
Homewood Park	Footpath vegetation clearance
	Wetland vegetation clearance
	Improvements to route marking
	Grass maintenance
	Invasive species removal
	Interpretation
Ether Hill/Queenswood	Route marking
	Interpretation
	Invasive species removal
	Viewpoint improvements
Ottershaw Chase/Timber Hill	Invasive species removal
St Ann's Hill	Circular route/footpath waymarking
	Interpretation and site entrance signage
	Car park improvements
	Balustrade works*
	Invasive species removal
	Vegetation management

*Balustrade works should not be sourced from SANG budgets

2.4 From the above list, the table below outlines the priority next steps to be addressed to ensure compliance as a SANG and to make immediate enhancements that will attract additional use of the sites:

Item	Site	Estimated Cost	Proposed Budget
Confirmation of parking arrangements	Hare Hill	TBC	SANG
Interpretation	St Ann's Hill, Hare Hill and Chertsey Meads	£51,000	SANG
Waymarkers	St Ann's Hill, Hare Hill, Homewood Park and Chertsey Meads	£20,000	SANG
Path improvement and clearance	St Ann's Hill and Homewood Park	£39,000	General Fund

2.5 Whilst the table above identifies that some works are likely to have to be funded by General Fund balances as opposed to ringfenced SANG budgets, Officers are to work initially with colleagues in Environmental Services to determine how much of this work can be completed in house to reduce General Fund costs.

2.6 As a result this paper is for information only and has no request for budgetary provision for completion of this work included. Should there be a budget requirement for such works, Officers will, in the first instance, consider any one-off underspends within 2023/2024 budgets before considering any other options.

- 2.7 Ongoing, to comply with the new management plans that are to be written and Natural England stipulations on SANGs, they must be maintained to a suitable level through appropriate maintenance and management of the open spaces. There is also a requirement as part of the Environment Act 2021 for green spaces to be enhanced and not just maintained.
- 2.8 Given the requirements of the standards of maintenance and now enhancement of sites, the need to ensure that there are appropriately skilled and equipped staff in place is key. This requirement has already been discussed with Environmental Services and discussions on future maintenance arrangements are ongoing.

3. Risk Implications

- 3.1 The principal risk to the Council is where there are identified works required that link to compliance requirements for SANG infrastructure. In a worst-case scenario, and certainly if not addressed, the Council could be at risk of receipt of fines from Natural England. Therefore, completion of priority work areas is key to mitigating such risk.
- 3.2 Given the immediate requirements and the likely additional ongoing maintenance requirements for SANG sites, there is a financial risk against the size of the SANG budgets currently in place for maintenance, management, and site development. To mitigate this risk, Officers within Open Space Development intend to carefully and accurately identify the ongoing maintenance requirements within the forthcoming management plans, and then work with colleagues in Environmental Services to complete a costing exercise. Working with Planning colleagues, it is intended that Officers will review the current SANG charges to ensure they accurately reflect the future requirements, an area identified as for consideration through benchmarking with other authorities.

4 Policy Implications

- 4.1 The SANG sites provide many residents the opportunity to explore the larger green spaces within Runnymede and exercise often with their dogs. This has a positive implication for the health and wellbeing strategy which emphasises the importance of outdoor recreation.
- 4.2 The impact that the larger green spaces within Runnymede have on Climate Change is also positive. Many sites are wooded and act as a carbon sink, grasslands too have a positive impact of carbon sequestration, flood alleviation, biodiversity and reducing the urban heat island effect.
- 4.3 SANGs were introduced as part of Planning Legislation and these sites clearly play a large part in Runnymede meeting its Planning obligations. The oversight of the SANGs is provided by Natural England and Officers have already been in discussions with them to provide an open dialogue in order to make progress with the forthcoming management plans.

5 Resource implications/Value for Money

- 5.1 Any works that are identified as able to be undertaken through use of the SANG budget, will be able to proceed at no additional cost to the Council. However, given the current level of available SANG budget, Officers will carefully assess the works required to ensure that tight financial controls are applied and that the most urgent items are carried out first.

5.2 The costs of the path improvement and clearance works identified at St Ann's Hill and Homewood Park will fall on the General Fund. These costs will be met from within existing resources.

6. Legal implications

6.1 The Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (TBH SPA) was designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA) on 9 March 2005. The SPA comprises an area of lowland heath and woodland and is a habitat protected under UK law supporting a characteristic landscape and distinctive flora and fauna under threat and in decline.

6.2 As highlighted in the body of the report the purpose of a SANG is to mitigate the impact of residential developments on the SPA. This mitigation can be achieved either by providing a SANG at any new development site or providing a financial contribution to enable an existing site to be enhanced and used as a SANG.

6.3 When SANGs were first devised it was accepted that existing open spaces could be used as SANGs subject to them being enhanced. The Council benefits from a number of open spaces and it was decided to enhance a number of those so that they could serve as SANGs. The financial contributions required to enhance existing sites are secured via Planning Obligation agreements made pursuant to the provisions of section 106 Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended). By the nature of the legal provisions governing these types of agreements the funds secured via them can only be used for the specific purpose for which they are provided.

6.4 The creation of appropriate management plans is one of the requirements associated with the provision of sites as SANGs. Such plans ensure that such sites do divert people away from the SPA by making such sites an attractive destination.

7. Equality implications

7.1 In order to comply with the Council's public sector equality duty, and where appropriate, an Equality Impact Screening or full impact assessment would be undertaken when specific works that may have equality implications are brought forward.

8. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

8.1 As previously mentioned, there exists a requirement as part of the Environment Act (2021) for green spaces to be enhanced and not just maintained. Councils must consider how to do this by the end of 2023. The onus on the Council is therefore to consider how better to manage its green spaces for the benefit of biodiversity.

8.2 Biodiversity improvements should be proposed for all SANG sites going forward as well as the other green spaces managed by the Council. The Council's recently appointed Biodiversity Officer will be working with Environmental Services going forward to deliver more biodiversity enhancements and works.

10. Timetable for Implementation

10.1 Most of the works described in the table in 1 are not seasonal. However, the vegetation clearance is seasonal and must be done between September and March to avoid disturbing nesting birds.

11. Conclusions

- 11.1 Some work is required on the SANGs within Council management, but these have been identified and will be actioned in collaboration with other Council departments.

12. Background papers

None stated.

13. Appendices

None.