

# The SOC Scotland's Bird Club



## COUNCIL MEETING 12<sup>th</sup> June 2016 Minutes

*SOC Scottish Charity Number: SC 009859  
A Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation*

Session 80/02 of Council was held at 10.30 hrs. on the 12<sup>th</sup> June 2016 at the RSPB Loch Leven reserve, Kinross.

**Present:** James Main (Vice President), Alan Fox (Hon Treasurer), David Heeley (Hon Secretary), Alison Creamer, Lesley Creamer, Alan Knox, Richard Leslie, Bob McGowan, Melvin Morrison, Ray Murray, David Rackham and Paul Taylor.

**In attendance:** Wendy Hicks (SOC HQ) and Jane Cleaver (SOC HQ)

### Action

- 1 **Apologies for absence** Apologies were received from Frank Hamilton (Honorary President), Helen Aiton, David Bain, Iain Gibson and Roger Gooch
- 2 **Absent** John Campbell, Angus McBay, Geoff Packard and Geoff Sheppard were absent
- 3 **Resignation of President** The Vice-president, James Main (JM) called the meeting to order. He noted that the President, Ian Thomson (IT) was not present.

He then read out a signed letter that he had very recently received. Ian Thomson intimated that he, with regret, would be standing down with immediate effect as Club President. He wished to inform Council that the increasing pressures of work, and a number of extremely unfortunate personal events that had impinged on his domestic circumstances, had meant that he had been unable recently to devote the time and attention to the position that he wanted to and that he felt was required. These matters were unlikely to change in the near future and he did not consider that he was able to provide the leadership necessary at this time. He stated that he had been very honoured to have been elected and wished to record his appreciation for the support that he had received from Council members and SOC staff during his time in office as Vice-president and then latterly as President.

Council reluctantly accepted the resignation, and wished to minute its appreciation of IT's frankness in informing it of the situation. Council noted IT's significant contributions to the work of the SOC and Council over a lengthy period of time and his service as a long-term member of the Club.

- 4 Appointment of Acting President and Acting Vice-president** Council approved the appointment of the Vice-President, James Main, as Acting President until the 2016 AGM to be held at Pitlochry on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2016.

*Proposed:* Alan Knox

*Seconded:* David Rackham

James Main was appointed without dissent.

The Acting President, JM, informed Council that Paul Taylor had agreed, subject to Council's approval, to accept the position of Acting Vice-president to assist him until the 2016 AGM. Council approved this arrangement, and thanked PT for being prepared to serve at such short notice.

- 5 Minutes of Council Meeting 80/01 held on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2016** The minutes for meeting held on the 6<sup>th</sup> March 2016 were approved.

- 6 Matters arising** 29<sup>th</sup> November 2015

§11. Nomination for National Honours. Council noted that the matter of nominations for National Honours remained unresolved. Following earlier discussions eminent candidates had been identified but the lack of information regarding criteria for acceptance had meant that the issue had been left to the President to decide. It had become clear that there was a view held externally that nominations from organisations that regularly submitted candidates were viewed less favourably than otherwise might be the case. Council noted that a perusal of the latest Honours List indicated that scientists were significantly under represented, comprising just some 5% of the total of those honoured. Nevertheless, on balance Council agreed that it would be wise not to proceed at present and to revisit the matter should an exceptionally strong candidate for nomination emerge in the future.

§16. RSPB representative on Council. A potential candidate had been previously identified within RSPB, but had yet to be approached to see if they were willing to participate in Council. Council recognised that there were a number of issues involved impinging on any decision such as the benefits of a broad based analysis of the skill set that would be desirable for potential Council members to possess, the need to aim for a balance of experience and skills across Council in general and the best ways in which an external perspective could be achieved. In a broad based discussion Council recognised that whilst there were many potential benefits with having someone from RSPB, similar arguments could perhaps be advanced for considering representation by other organisations such as BTO with which the Club already enjoyed a close partnership and shared ideals. As part of the discussions, Council considered the impact of the existing situation with two Elected Members due to step down at the next AGM (Bob McGowan and Alison Creamer) and a third, Richard Leslie who had taken up the post of Chair of Lothian Branch and was therefore attending in the capacity as Branch Representative creating an additional vacancy for an Elected Member. It was agreed that having three Council members demit office at the same time was unwise in the first instance, and contrary to the intentions of the Constitution which indicated that Elected Members should be replaced by annual rotation. It was agreed further that the Secretary (DH) would bring a short paper to Council at its next meeting outlining a proposed scheme for desynchronising the dates of appointment.

**DH**

6<sup>th</sup> March 2016

§9. Uplift in funding for Research & Surveys Committee. Council confirmed that the intention of its decision of 6<sup>th</sup> March was a permanent increase in the funds available to the R & S Committee, this being an increase up to a maximum of £4k per annum. It was agreed that Wendy Hicks (WH) would inform the Chair of the R & S Committee of this clarification. **WH**

**7 Finance**

The Treasurer, Alan Fox (AF) informed Council that he would be having a meeting with the Independent Financial Advisor, Sandy Scotland, on 13<sup>th</sup> July to discuss the accounts for the 2015 – 2016 financial year. The “headline” figure was that the Club had in that period spent approximately £20k more than it had taken in, but that this was within planning limits and did not represent a financial risk. AF then presented a synopsis of the Accounts for the first 3 ½ months of the current financial year. Summarising, he drew Council’s attention to the fact that there had been a significant increase in sales of optics, that Expenses were broadly similar to the preceding financial year at the equivalent point, and that the financial situation overall was in line with 2015-2016.

Overall, he noted that the Club had some £275k in funds (excluding the BS3 fund, capital funds and endowments) and he estimated that £130k was the level of reserves needed to keep the Club running for 6 months. Council needed to be aware that at the current rate of expenditure, and without any further endowments, the reserves would be exhausted within 4 to 5 years. He pointed out that the BS3 fund comes up for review in 2017 and therefore some transfer to general funds would be possible if needed. He also drew Council’s attention to the fact that there was a certain level of unrestricted funds tied up in Waterston House at present. These could, by special resolution of Council, be transferred to general funds, but cautioned that from the perspective of financial reporting to the OSCR, it was preferable if the funds were not aggregated.

In terms of new expenditures, he reported that the new Pensions provision involved an enrolment fee that was payable in February 2017. The process of selecting a pensions provider was on track and the final decision would be taken at the next meeting of the Management Committee. Implementing the employer contribution to the pension scheme would involve an increase in expenditure of some 3% of salary costs, which at present would be approximately £3k per annum.

The Chair thanked AF for his presentation of the accounts and for his continued prudent management of the Club’s finances.

**8 Branch and Membership Development**

The Development officer, Jane Cleaver (JC) presented a paper that provided a three month synopsis of new membership recruitment, membership cancellations and a range of development projects that she had been involved with.

- Fifty five new members had joined with some 40 cancellations in the same period. A graphical analysis of new memberships showed that the overwhelming majority were those who joined ‘online’ (43 out of the 55) and of these nearly 50% had joined without any specific recommendation from a friend or existing member, or in response to publicity. It was concluded that those joining in this way could only have done so by conducting internet searches, and this underlined the importance of the Club’s website and the need to keep it up to date and modernised. JC pointed out

that there were a number of cancellations which were a result of the membership having lapsed, and that at present it was not possible to determine why this was so.

- As at 16<sup>th</sup> May 2016, the total membership stood at 3289 if family memberships are counted as two individuals, which represented an increase over the calendar year of some 100 members.

With respect to outreach activity, JC reported that the Scottish Birdfair at Scotland's Big Nature Festival which was held in May had attracted lower numbers than previously, and that there was a change in focus towards providing an event attractive to family groups. Overall it was a fairly costly event for the Club (some £700 for the stand), and as it did not result in any significant membership recruitment it had come to represent a poor return for the investment of staff time and Club funds. JC pointed out that it was unclear in any case whether it would be held in 2017.

JC informed Council that she was submitting the Young Birders Training Course held on the Isle of May for consideration for the Nature of Scotland Awards from RSPB Scotland. She had been reassured that the project fitted the application criteria and was hopeful of a positive outcome.

A broad ranging discussion was held regarding possible large scale, long term developments that might enhance the Club's reputation and help support the birdwatching community. It was noted that Waterston House was frequently approached by visitors who were seeking some form of guiding for birding visits to Scotland, and the Edinburgh area in particular. Provision of such a service would have to be at a professional level, and this raised a number of issues such as insurance cover, transport and so forth. It was clear that within the Club there was a considerable level of expertise (for example, noting the success of the Birding Guide auction at the Spring Conference in the Borders), but at the same time it was less clear the Club was the appropriate organisation to provide such a service on a long term basis. It was agreed that further discussions should be held, and that JC would bring a discussion paper to the next meeting of Council developing the idea.

JC

Council then considered an outline proposal for the development of a form of site guide for birdwatching in Scotland. JC noted that the popularity and widespread use of smartphones indicated that publication in book form, if the project were to go ahead, was less likely to be successful than a smartphone app. Council considered a number of issues, such as the current availability of site guides, and regular publications in national magazines. It recognised that the project had a number of merits, but that it did raise a number of technical and organisational questions. It was agreed that the main priority was to be clear about what such a project would be trying to achieve, the need for clarity in the initial design stages, and the type of content envisaged. It was agreed that JC would work on an outline scoping proposal in consultation with Alan Knox and Ray Murray for consideration at a future meeting of Council.

JC / AK/  
RM

Discussion continued on the theme raised at previous Council meetings of the low level of participation by members in Branch activities. Council had considered the potential development of a concept of a 'virtual Branch' that would offer electronic access to Club materials and events for those members in remote locations, or who were uninterested in attending Branch meetings or outings. No firm conclusions were drawn, but it was recognised that some steps could be taken to involve a higher proportion on the membership. It was agreed that JC would investigate the possibility of creating a Club-wide electronic Newsletter as a means of improving communication and report back

JC

to a future meeting.

The Chair thanked JC for her work as Development Officer.

**9 Conferences update and report**

The Office Manager, Wendy Hicks (WH) presented a draft programme for the forthcoming conference to be held at Pitlochry in September 2016. She noted that there were insufficient confirmed speakers to fill the slots available. Filling these was an urgent matter as the programme would need to be posted on the Club website in the very near future. Council was invited to contact her immediately with appropriate suggestions for speakers who would fall within the broad topic area of Scotland's Seabirds. WH was pleased to report that Swarovski had agreed to continue their sponsorship of the conference, and that the Atholl Palace Hotel had accepted an October booking for 2017.

The spring conference 2017 held in partnership with the BTO, with the SOC providing the lead, would be held in Fife. A number of possible venues had been considered, and the Carnegie Conference Centre in Dunfermline had been identified as the most appropriate, with a good combination of price, facilities and accessibility. Paul Taylor (PT) noted that the latest Fife Atlas would be published in the autumn and that Fife Branch would use the conference to showcase this new work.

WH reported that progress was being made on preparing the Annual Report for the AGM. The financial aspects would be completed by the end of July, and committee Chairs will be asked for their reports. Council noted that new members of Council needed to be elected at the 2016 AGM (see §6 of this Minute).

The Chair thanked WH for the update and report.

**10 Formation of a Birding Committee**

It was agreed to set aside discussion of the formation of a Birding Committee until a future meeting.

**11 Appointments**

Treasurer:

Council was informed that there had been little or no interest in the post to date with no volunteers coming forward. It was clearly going to be challenging finding a successor to Alan Fox, and the Chair (JM) indicated that filling this position was a matter of the highest priority for him.

Finance Officer:

AF informed Council that no further progress had been made with this appointment. The current Bookkeeper is not due to retire until August 2017 and has no interest in expanding her role to encompass that of Finance Office. In the meantime, AF noted that next year's Accounts should be prepared by the new Treasurer (with his assistance) and that in his view the best way to proceed would be to set up a new Finance Committee who then would be in a position to make the Finance Officer appointment and assist in the appointment of a Treasurer.

Finance Committee:

AF presented a paper describing the remit of the putative Finance Committee. It was agreed to accept the remit and that

- the Committee should comprise the Treasurer and two others members who would be Trustees of the Club (and hence members of Council)
- that external consultation should be sought as and when circumstances required it

- that the group should have a good working knowledge of the financial issues affecting the Club
- that vacancies would be filled on the recommendation of the group subject to approval by Council

Council accepted that the Finance Committee should not be involved in devising financial strategy, but rather should act to inform Council of what was required in financial terms to ensure that the Club remained viable. It was agreed that it would be prudent to wait until the election of new members of Council at the AGM before proceeding to appoint Trustees to the group.

**12 AOCB**

- Local Bird Recorders Conference. Ray Murray spoke to a paper that he had prepared which highlighted a number of issues that had arisen such as the production of Bird Reports, archiving of Bird Records and the relationship between Bird Recorders and Birdguides that all indicated that a Local Recorders Conference would be beneficial. He noted also that the involvement of the SBRC would also be useful if the conference went ahead. A possibility would be to hold such a conference on the day following the Spring Conference 2017 in Dunfermline. It was agreed that Ray Murray would circulate fellow Bird Recorders and the SBRC with an outline proposal and would report back to Council at a future meeting. It was agreed further that an outline budget of £500 should be made available for the event.
- Birdtrack. Council had received the latest position paper on the proposed development of Birdtrack. There were a number of issues that it was felt could be raised concerning the future shape of Birdtrack and the extent to which it could be optimised for the work of local Bird Recorders. Council were clear that the SOC should support these developments, and agreed that individual comments should be submitted to Stuart Rivers (the SOC's representative on the Birdtrack Working Group).
- A brief discussion took place regarding the guidelines for the publication of photographic material in the Club's Gallery, especially that which related to Schedule 1 species. It was noted that the Gallery was not a reporting service, and that great care had to be taken to ensure that breeding birds were not disturbed by overly enthusiastic photographers. JC wished to ensure that the guidance notes reflected best practice, and Council agreed to forward comments on the current guidance to her so that it could be brought up to date.
- WH informed Council that LINK intended to increase the subscription paid by SOC. During discussion it was agreed that the Club was not a campaigning organisation, deliberately lacked policies on environmental matters and did not employ an environmental officer or equivalent. This latter issue raised specific difficulties as it was noted that LINK meetings were scheduled on the assumption that participating organisations employed someone in this specific type of role who could attend meetings arranged during the working day. This had in the past created significant difficulties for volunteers representing the Club. AF, being the representative on the LINK Marine Taskforce indicated that the situation was unlikely to change and that LINK

**RM / AF**

**Council**

**JC**

lacked a clear relevance for the SOC. It was agreed that the Club should withdraw from LINK and that WH would inform them of this decision.

**WH**

**13 Next Meeting** 14<sup>th</sup> August 2016: 10:30 at RSPB Loch Leven

Signed:



Date: 14<sup>th</sup> August 2016

James Main, Acting President