

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Epping Forest and Commons Committee	19 th November 2018
Subject: Stoke Common Management Plan, Public Consultation and Grant Application	Public
Report of: Superintendent of The Commons	For Decision

Summary

The transfer of Stoke Common from South Bucks District Council to the City of London Corporation was completed on 31st October 2007. At that time, the Superintendent consulted a wide audience to guide the development of a 10-year management plan for the site. This Committee approved that plan in July 2008.

A new 10-year 'draft' management plan has been produced for Stoke Common commencing 1st January 2019 to guide the City Corporation's work on the site. Extensive consultation has again been undertaken with a wide range of stakeholders prior to the production of this final draft version.

Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) Scheme has until now, provided the majority of the funding for the restoration work of the heathland. This source of grant funding expired on 31st October 2018.

A fresh grant application has been submitted for Natural England's new 'Countryside Stewardship' Scheme that replaces HLS. This grant will help the City to ensure the continuation of heathland restoration work on the site for the duration of the proposed management plan.

Members are asked to:

- i. Approve the final draft plan so that it can then be submitted to Natural England for ratification.

Main Report

Background

1. The transfer of Stoke Common, an ancient heathland and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), from South Bucks District Council (SBDC) to the City of London Corporation was completed on 31st October 2007.
2. Since that date, the City's team based at Burnham Beeches has actively managed the restoration of the site to heathland.
3. Natural England (NE) recently assessed the condition of the SSSI as being in 'improving condition' having previously recorded it as being in 'unfavourable, declining condition'. Natural England further commented that the City Corporation has achieved very substantial improvements in restoring the valuable heathland habitats since the site came into its ownership.

4. Community engagement has been key to this success. Local communities and various conservation experts were consulted during the development of the original site management plan. A Friends of Stoke Common Group was also formed at that time to help deliver the ambitious work programme. This group continues to flourish and support the City's work.

Current Position

5. Management Plan

- i. The City's original Stoke Common management plan ran for a 10-year period commencing 2008. It expired on 31st October 2018. A new management plan, in final draft form, has been produced by the Conservation Officer and Head Ranger.

6. Natural England Grant

- i. The previous management plan was heavily supported via grant income from NE's Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. That grant, and area payments under the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS), covered the majority of costs associated with the heathland restoration works that have remained at £53K per annum in total.

Table 1.

Expenditure	
Employees	£19,000
Grounds Maintenance	£27,000
Supplies and Services	£6,000
Third Party Payments	£1,000
<u>Total Expenditure</u>	<u>£53,000</u>
<u>Income from HLS Grant</u>	<u>£21,000</u>
<u>Income from BPS grant</u>	<u>£10,000</u>
<u>Total cost to local risk</u>	<u>£22,000/annum</u>

- ii. The HLS grant funding of £21,000 per annum ended on 31st October 2018.
- iii. A new grant application under NE's Countryside Stewardship Scheme was submitted in September 2018 and, assuming they approve it in December 2018, the outcome is shown in in the table below.

Table 2.

Expenditure	
Employees	£19,000
Grounds Maintenance	£20,000
Supplies and Services	£6,000
Third Party Payments	£1,000
<u>Total Expenditure</u>	<u>£46,000</u>

Income from HLS Grant	£14,000
Income from BPS grant	£10,000
Total cost to local risk	£22,000/annum

- iv. Payments, if approved by NE, will commence January 2019. Members will note that the amount available to spend to manage the common during the new management plan will be reduced by £7,000 per annum compared to the previous period. This figure is currently felt to be sufficient to complete this latest, less management intensive, phase of the site's restoration and additional financial support need not be sought for the foreseeable future.
- v. It was not possible for the new grant to start at an earlier date so, during the two-month period November and December 2018, the City will not receive a grant. This will create an unavoidable shortfall in income for the current financial year of £3,500 that will be met from Local Risk budgets.
7. **Public Consultation.** Officers consulted extensively during the production of this plan (and to a lesser degree, the Countryside Stewardship Grant Application). Audiences included, Local Communities, Local Authorities, NE and the Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Consultation Group and conservation specialists.
8. **Committee Consultation.** Members visited the site in September 2018 and were provided with detailed notes for discussion on the major issues arising during the production of the draft plan.
9. Your Superintendent has assessed the need for an Equality Analysis of the draft management plan for Stoke Common. The first step under such circumstances is to carry out a 'Test of Relevance' to determine any negative, positive or neutral impacts of the draft plan. In this instance, the test of relevance concluded 'no negative impacts' so further assessment was not required.

Options

- Option 1. Approve the draft management plan so that it can be considered and ratified by Natural England. This is the recommended option.
- Option 2. Require amendments to the plan. Members may wish to suggest further amendments to the draft plan but should note this may delay payments under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

Implications

10. Option 1 will allow the plan to be forwarded to Natural England for grant approval and commencement of payments from January 1st 2019.
11. Option 2. If members require amendments to the draft plan and they are of a significant nature, the plan may require further external consultation that may cause delays to the commencement of Countryside Stewardship Grant payments.

12. The cost of producing the management plan was met from the Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common local risk budgets. Costs included consultation events, additional mapping/surveys and the publication of the final document(s) amounting to approximately £5,000.
13. Having been consulted on the production of this report the Human Resources Department has concluded that there are no likely adverse implications.

Proposals

14. It is proposed that once approved the management plan will be forwarded to Natural England for ratification and commencement of Countryside Stewardship Scheme payments from 1st January 2019.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

17. The proposals in this report support the Corporate Business Plan as follows:

Contribute to a Flourishing Society

- People enjoy good health and wellbeing
- Communities are cohesive and have the facilities they need

Shape outstanding environments

- Our Spaces are secure, resilient and well maintained.
- We have clean air, land and water and a thriving and sustainable environment

And the Open Spaces Business Plan as follows:

- **Open Spaces and Historic Sites are thriving and accessible**
- **Spaces enrich people's lives**
- **Business practices are responsible and sustainable**

Conclusion

14. A new management plan has been developed following extensive public consultation. A grant application under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme has been developed and submitted in lock step with the development of this plan.
15. Should Members approve the draft management plan it must then be ratified by Natural England so that Countryside Stewardship grant payments can commence.

Appendices

Appendix 1. (Draft) Management Plan for Stoke Common 2019 – 2028.

Background Papers:

Stoke Common Management Plan – 20th November 2017
Equalities Impact Assessment – Test of Relevance

Author

Andy Barnard
Superintendent of The Commons – Open Spaces Department
T: 0207 332 6676. E: andy.barnard@cityoflondon.gov.uk