

Committee(s): Open Spaces and City Gardens Committee Epping Forest and Commons Committee	Date(s): 8 April 2019 20 May 2019
Subject: Proposed National Nature Reserve status for the Coulston Commons and Happy Valley	Public
Report of: Colin Buttery, Director of Open Spaces	For Decision
Report author: Andy Barnard, Superintendent of the Commons	

Summary

At the January 2019 meeting of this Committee, Members authorised Officers to progress the declaration of a proposed National Nature Reserve (covering the Coulston Commons and Happy Valley) with Natural England and in partnership with the London Borough of Croydon, so that a formal proposal could be developed and reported by May 2019. Additional meetings with Natural England and the London Borough of Croydon have since ensued.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- i. Approve the confirmation, by Natural England in summer 2019, of the 'South London Downs National Nature Reserve' with completion of their formal declaration process by November 2019.

Main Report

Background

1. National Nature Reserves (NNRs) are a Natural England declaration that reflects the recreational and conservation value of important sites across England. NNRs are recognised as being 'our finest wildlife sites'. There are currently 224 NNRs in England, covering 360 square miles (0.7% of England).
2. Natural England produced a new NNR strategy in 2017 that encourages the consideration of additional NNR's across England that meet their strategic criteria. Appendix 1
3. There are currently only two NNR's in Greater London i.e. Richmond Park and Ruislip Woods.
4. Two of the City's Open Spaces already have NNR status; both are within The Commons Division namely, Burnham Beeches NNR in Buckinghamshire (declared 1992) and Ashted Common NNR in Surrey (declared 1995).

5. In January 2019 your Committee authorised Officers to progress the designation of a pNNR (covering the Coulsdon Commons and Happy Valley) with Natural England and the London Borough of Croydon, so that a formal proposal could be developed and reported by May 2019.
6. At that time Members were also informed that the name of the new NNR, should it be declared, is to be 'The South London Downs National Nature Reserve' a name that recognises both its geographic location within Greater London and its geology.
7. NNR's are declared by NE under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, 1949. Private landowners that manage the NNR network must meet the standards set by NE to become an 'Approved Body'
8. The City of London has been an 'Approved Body' since 1992. The process of attaining Approved Body status for LBC will run concurrently alongside the NNR declaration.
9. The declaration of land as a NNR not only recognises the high recreation and conservation value of the site but the high standards of management expertise necessary to maintain their value. The NNR declaration is a high profile opportunity for the City to celebrate the importance of the Commons to local people and the conservation and access work being undertaken.
10. A map of the proposed NNR (pNNR) boundary is shown as **Map 1**. It consists of some 417 hectares of land of which approx. 36% is designated by Natural England as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). There is scope to further enlarge the boundary of the NNR later should that be desired.

Current Position

11. Discussions have continued between The City of London, LBC and NE since January 2019 and agreement reached concerning the shared organisational Vision, Mission and Objectives for the pNNR. These are documented as the 'Joint Statement of Intent' and shown below:
 - a. **NNR Title:** South London Downs National Nature Reserve.
 - b. **NNR Vision:** The South London Downs nature is restored, enriched and treasured by the people it supports.
 - c. **NNR Mission:** To ensure the South London Downs NNR thrives. We act beyond boundaries. We harness the power of partnership, combining passion, science and innovation to create resilient landscapes, rich in wildlife, where people can engage with the natural world
 - d. **NNR Objectives:** Land owners will work in partnership, within available resources, to achieve the vision of the NNR by:
 - i. Managing the NNR across ownership boundaries to harmonise the benefits of biodiversity, science and recreation;
 - ii. Working collaboratively to maximise positive management;

- iii. Engaging local communities and visitors in the maintenance, enhancement and further landscape resilience of the NNR via volunteering, education, research and recreation;
 - iv. Developing long term monitoring programmes to increase understanding of the natural environment
 - v. Working collaboratively to provide opportunities to enhance the health and wellbeing of local communities and visitors through engaging and creative projects;
 - vi. Ensuring the NNR is appropriately recognised in local planning policies and local decision making
 - vii. Sourcing external funding for collaborative projects
 - viii. Enhancing landscape resilience, joining up with external sites to extend the reach of the NNR as opportunities arise
12. A detailed document providing further the background information to the pNNR can be found in Appendix 2.
13. It is proposed that governance of the partnership will be developed at an early stage of the partnership and once the declaration is approved. Consideration is currently being given to the eventual adoption of the 'Consultative Group' approach that already operates across The Commons but other models remain possible and the eventual approach should be given time to take shape.
14. Officers of LBC are taking a similar report through their procedural channels and anticipate approval in readiness for formal declaration of the pNNR by July 2019.
15. Natural England have formally expressed their support to the City of London concerning the declaration of the new pNNR and have set out the timetable for their internal procedures leading to formal designation. Appendix 3.
16. NE has also developed a very useful Q&A document to provide background information and assist consistent messaging. Appendix 4.

Proposals

17. It is proposed that:
- a. Members approve the designation of the pNNR, subject to successful:
 - i. Approval by LBC
 - ii. NE status confirmation – July 2019
 - iii. NE Declaration – November 2019
 - b) A tentative launch date to be determined but likely to be timed to coincide with National Park City week 21-28 July 2019 to which Councillors, Members, Officers and Members of the public will be invited to attend. Early discussion indicate that Wednesday 24th July bets suits the various partners.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

18. The recommendations of this report supports the Corporate Plan with particular reference to the following aims:
 - a. Contribute to a flourishing society**
 - b. Shape Outstanding Environments**

And supports the Open Spaces Business Plan as follows:

- a. Open Spaces and historic sites are thriving and accessible.**
- a. Spaces enrich people's lives.**
- b. Business practices are responsible and sustainable.**

Implications

19. Experience at Burnham Beeches and Ashted Common indicates that NNR status does not place an additional funding burden on the City. Indeed the status can attract additional funding, particularly towards the cost of education, research and monitoring as well as help to raise the landowners profile and facilitate grant applications.
20. Management activity on the City's Coulsdon Commons within the pNNR, will continue to be met from local risk budgets according to the available resources and with continuing reliance on external grants and income generation.
21. The proposal provides opportunities to build closer working partnerships with the London Borough of Croydon and perhaps other local landowners to develop shared management plans, objectives and projects with the prospect of making more efficient use of available resources.
22. NNR status does not bring greater legal protection (or management obligation) to the land but it does accord high reputational value to NNR landowners and can give greater weight to environmental protection issues as part of Local Authority Local Plans.

Open Spaces Charities

23. The Coulsdon Commons are Registered Charity No 232989. Officers have been asked to remind Members that decisions they take in relation to the relevant charity must be taken in the best interests of that charity

Conclusion

24. NNR status is considered to be cost neutral yet provides enhanced reputational value to the owners of the land and their management of the natural environment and will facilitate further grant funding opportunities.
25. NNR status of the Coulsdon Commons, as part of the South London Downs NNR, would demonstrate the City's commitment to the Government's strategic aim to create landscape scale conservation projects.
26. Officers of the City of London, London Borough of Croydon and Natural England, recognise the value of designating the Coulsdon Commons and,

Happy Valley as the South London Downs NNR and seek authority to proceed according to the timetable shown in paragraph 17.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Natural England's NNR Strategy

Appendix 2. Further background. South London Downs NNR

Appendix 3. NE letter of support to the City of London Corporation

Appendix 4. Q&A briefing paper

Map 1. pNNR boundary, SSSI status and ownership.

Background papers

December 2018 and January 2019 reports to Open Spaces and Epping Forest and Commons Committees.

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