

<b>Committee(s)</b>	<b>Dated:</b>
Epping Forest Consultative Epping Forest and Commons	12 06 2019 8 07 2019
<b>Subject:</b> Epping Forest Buffer Lands – Annual Agricultural Holdings review for 2018 and proposals for 2019 (SEF 25/19)	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Colin Buttery, Director of Open Spaces	<b>For Decision</b>
<b>Report author:</b> Jeremy Dagley, Head of Conservation, Epping Forest	

### Summary

This report provides a summary of the main agricultural land management activities completed in 2018 – 19. No significant changes were recommended by the appointed land agent in terms of the tenancies at Netherhouse and Obelisk Field.

The 10-year Environmental Stewardship agreement that covered the Buffer Land holdings has been completed, as at 31<sup>st</sup> October 2018. The Forest's conservation management objectives, as well as the Buffer Lands management, were directly supported by the Buffer Land Estate's generation of a combined grant income of over £132,000.

Proposals for a grant application under the new Countryside Stewardship (CS) scheme are currently under development as part of the CS Project, with a 2020 application proposed. As a result, the FY2019-20 falls in an interim year and the agri-environment grant-aid will be reduced. This was reported as part of the earlier CS reporting and further CS reports will provide more detail on the grant situation.

This current report also previews proposed management and wildlife conservation operations, which will be in-line with national cross-compliance regulations. Copped Hall Park estate, including the historic parkland, is to be the subject of separate reports to Committee, as the detailed proposals for a Parkland Plan and grant application are prepared and the management across Copped Hall is reviewed.

### Recommendation(s)

Consultative Committee Members are asked to approve:

1. the procurement of land agency advice as required for negotiations with tenants;
2. the procurement of contract services for the carrying out of agricultural management, including fencing and weed control, as required, following City Procurement procedures;
3. general management proposals in paragraphs 32 -39 of this report

4. The Town Clerk, in association with the Chairman and Deputy Chairman, are delegated the responsibility to settle a tenancy dispute regarding boundaries and alleged damage by deer browsing.

## **Main Report**

### **Background**

5. The City of London maintains 735 hectares of strategically acquired Buffer Lands Estate under the approved Buffer Lands Policy. Collectively, the Buffer Lands Estate plays a key role in supporting the management objectives for the internationally important Forest and protects it from development and adverse land uses.
6. The City of London's Buffer Land is intended to help preserve the environmental setting, landscape heritage and quality (including historic grazing land linkages) and conservation of the Forest, as approved in the Buffer Lands Strategy & Policy by the Policy and Resources Committee on 14 October 1993.
7. The importance of these roles has been recognised in the current version of the Epping Forest District Council Local Plan, which includes an objective to '*conserve and enhance*' the Forest and its Buffer Lands
8. Over the past 60 years the City has acquired and consolidated 14 parcels of land, totalling 735 hectares (ha), on the perimeter of the Forest. This Buffer Land provides complementary wildlife habitats and recreational links between the Forest and the wider countryside and is of nature conservation and heritage importance. The area subject of this report is the 466ha, (63.4%) of the estate which is under agricultural (grassland and arable) management.
9. The remaining 269.13ha of non-agricultural Buffer Land Estate comprises woodland, golf courses and the Deer Sanctuary. The grassland of the Sanctuary also attracts income under the Basic Payment Scheme and until October 2018 was also grant-aided under the Forest's Environmental Stewardship (ES) agreement with Natural England (NE).
10. In addition to income from tenancies on the agricultural areas of the Buffer Lands the estate has also attracted grant-aid which is an important support for its conservation management. The Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) provides agri-environment support for the grassland management and is set to continue until 2021 before it may be replaced by another scheme.
11. Until October 2018 the Buffer Lands also formed a significant component of the Entry Level and Higher Level Environmental Stewardship (ES) Schemes (ELS/HLS), also generating "points" for habitat options that allowed income-generating habitat options to be located on the Forest (see also *Financial Implications* below).
12. With the completion of the ES management agreement in October 2018 this funding has now come to an end. In looking to replace this revenue and continue the important wildlife and heritage conservation, ecosystem services and recreational access works, a review of Buffer Land sites is being conducted in

preparation for an application under the new Countryside Stewardship scheme (CS) in 2020.

13. In addition to income generation, much of this Buffer Land is also important to the Forest for operational reasons. In particular, the Buffer Lands provide essential support for the grazing of the Forest's wood-pasture by providing key grazing, haylage, lay-back lands and out-wintering areas for the Forest cattle

### **Current Position and 2018-19 report**

14. The BPS payments and the ELS & HLS points generated by the Buffer Lands provided a combined anticipated final income in 2018-19 for the Epping Forest Local Risk budgets of around £132,354 (see also *Financial Implications* below).
15. The recommendations approved by Committee last year were either started or completed and updates are included in the paragraphs below.
16. The importance of the Buffer Lands' role in protecting the Forest's landscape setting, environment and biodiversity has been recognised in the current submission version of the Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) Local Plan (Dec 2017). During 2018-19, a number of further submissions on the Local Plan were made by The Conservators to EFDC about the importance of protecting the estate's wildlife and heritage.
17. These submissions also highlighted the potential of parts of the estate to play an important role in protecting the Forest by providing sites of alternative natural green space (SANGs), which would help the Local Plan fulfil its objective of conserving and enhancing the Forest and its Buffer Lands.

### **Grazing at Warlies Park and Copped Hall:**

18. The Buffer Lands play a vital role in ensuring the continuation of traditional grazing of the Forest wood-pasture habitat. The grazing on the Buffer Lands also provides the appropriate management of the heritage parkland at Warlies and the Grade II\* protected landscape at Copped Hall Park, which also lies in a wider local authority Conservation Area.
19. During 2018, the in-house grazing herd of English Longhorns grazed Warlies Park throughout the season, with over 100 different animals each grazing the fields at some point during this time. At **Copped Hall** the fields were cut for winter hay for the Longhorn herd and grazed by a licensee under an annual grazing licence.
20. The cattle from both the in-house and licensee's herds came off the Buffer Lands by November 2018. The move to winter housing completed a successful year of 33,075 grazing days. This exceeds previous grazing activity across all sites in all previous years and follows the move to in-house management in November 2016.
21. All the cattle are now housed at Great Gregories. Autumn calving started with 36 calves being born by the end of December 2018. A further 8 calves were born

between January and April 2019. This total of 44 represents the largest total calving so far in the grazing project. The timing of the calving continues the shift to earlier calving in autumn months and away from the previous regime of late winter / spring calving. This change now ensures that we have more appropriately aged animals ready for our grazing sites, when they are put out to grass in May.

22. **Copped Hall:** during 2017-18 Natural England (NE) had highlighted the importance of Copped Hall Park as one of three key protected parklands in the region that remained without a full Parkland Plan. NE offered 80% grant-funding support to ensure that a Plan could be produced during the year. As a result, the consultants Rural Advice were engaged by your officers in 2018 following a tender process. After two meetings with the consultants in early 2018 they carried out extensive fieldwork in regular consultation with your officers. A draft version of their report was produced in summer 2018 and was subject to comment and discussion with officers. Since then, proposals for entering the Park, and other parts of Copped Hall, into a Countryside Stewardship application are being prepared and will be subject to a separate consultation and reporting process to Committee with the aim of completing an application for funding in the next financial year 2020-21
23. In the meantime, the consultant's report, which is still being reviewed, had highlighted the "exceptional (national) significance" of the Park. This was on the basis of the discovery of Tudor earthworks in Rookery Wood, combined with mid-18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Century landscape features and WWII pill boxes and the views across the wider landscape.
24. In 2019 an archaeological walk was conducted to add to the information from the survey and provide a complete record of all features on or below the surface. No further notable finds were made that changed the conclusions of the report.
25. **Great Gregories**  
Following the excellent work in the previous year, volunteer hedge layers laid a further 110m of hedge adjacent to the footpath that runs to the south of the site.
26. A bespoke handling and penning system was installed in the top shed to ensure higher welfare and safety for livestock, staff and volunteers. This project was assisted by finance through the central Director's funding scheme to add to local risk budgets.
27. A nationally renowned animal behaviour specialist was involved as a consultant in the design to ensure the smooth transition of livestock through the system. The Handling system allows for lone working, penning of sick animals, separation of bulls when not working and the single file loading of cattle onto trailers. It has improved the safety, speed and efficiency of animal handling already this last winter.
28. The main entrance gate to the yard has been upgraded to a single, sliding motorised gate. This improves security as the existing gate could be manually forced open and often failed to open in high winds due to resistance. The old gate frame was re-used to form the face of the new frame which reduced costs.

29. The tenancies at **Netherhouse, Woodredon Estate (south)** and **Obelisk Field, Warlies** were reviewed with advice from the external land agent with no significant changes recommended.
30. **Raveners**: the four fields at Raveners Farm were cut for hay for the Longhorn herd.
31. Haylage was also taken from **Gt Gregories** fields for over-winter feed for the in-house Longhorn herd. North farm was let out on an annual herbage agreement.
32. The **Trees Outside Woods Project** was not pursued by the Woodland Trust following our expression of interest being part of the project. Woodland Trust had to review its project in response to the change in the Heritage Lottery Fund's (HLF) grant application process, which meant that HLF would not consider large grants during most of 2018.

## Proposals

33. As part of improving the land management standards on the whole Buffer Lands estate the aim for the future is to move away from artificial inputs (e.g. inorganic fertilisers) and to manage soil health through regenerative practices. All sites are being reviewed with this in mind.
34. **Copped Hall (North)**: The Farm Business Tenancy (FBT) that covers half of this area and currently runs until 20<sup>th</sup> September 2021 is proposed for an interim review this year with the tenant.
35. **Copped Hall (North & South)**: No annual herbage agreements for grazing or grass crops will be offered this year. Instead **Copped Hall Park** will be grazed by the in-house herd and haylage at **Raveners** will be taken for in-house use.
36. The **Copped Hall CMP** (see above) report is having the final review changes made and the proposals in the report have been considered for a Countryside Stewardship bid. These proposals are to be put to through the Committee cycle, including the Management Plan Steering Group and Consultative Committee over the next year, for discussion and approval ahead of any bid for grant-aid under CS.
37. The main body of **Warlies Park** would continue to be grazed by the in-house English Longhorn herd, as would the smaller fields at **Gt Gregories**. The remaining **Gt Gregories** fields would be taken for haylage as in previous years to ensure a good winter supply of fodder, although this year's (2019) grass growth looks likely to be much lower than recent years due to a prolonged period of low rainfall.
38. At **Swaines Green**, following the completion of permanent fencing along the southern boundary with a neighbouring property, arrangements are to be made for access through the northern boundary gate for our neighbour, Epping Town Council.
39. The following works on the Buffer Lands are scheduled for 2019:

- i. replacement of fencing at various sites would continue with both contractors and in-house staff carrying out the work, including replacement and/or repairs to lengths of **Warlies Park** and **Woodredon North** fencing and replacement of gates;
  - ii. the four fields at **Woodredon North**, which are now managed in-house, would be cut early for a crop of silage. It is likely that only one crop would be achieved this year;
  - iii. at **Woodredon South** settlement is required of a dispute with a tenant regarding boundary issues and alleged damage to arable crops from browsing by deer. While as a landowner the City Corporation has no direct responsibility for the level of browsing by wild deer it may be necessary to review the level of rent to reflect these two matters.
  - iv. weed control may need to be carried out as in previous years, by a variety of methods including topping as well as some herbicide treatment, which for Ragwort would follow the Epping Forest Ragwort Protocol. However, the use of chemicals will be avoided if possible;
40. Management of the wildlife margins at **Copped Hall North** (alongside the tenanted arable land) for the benefit of biodiversity, especially farmland birds – both those breeding and over-wintering. There are at least two breeding pairs of Yellowhammers, a bird species in population decline, that use these areas to feed, with at least one nest site. A study by Middlesex University, in close liaison with in-house conservation staff continues into its third year there.

## Corporate & Strategic Implications

41. The work and proposals outlined above meet the City of London Corporate Plan's (2015 -2019) key policy priorities of:
- maximising the opportunities and benefits afforded by our role in supporting London's communities;
  - increasing the outreach and impact of the City's cultural, heritage and leisure contribution to the life of London and the nation.
42. **Open Spaces Department Business Plan** - The proposals follow from three of the Open Spaces Department's Strategic aims of: providing high quality accessible open spaces, involving communities in site management and adopting sustainable working practices.
43. **Epping Forest Management Plan** - The proposals match a number of the key points in the Epping Forest Vision for the 21st Century's including:
- i. Epping Forest's position as a unique and ancient landscape for people and wildlife will be strengthened;
  - ii. The Forest will retain its natural aspect with the diversity of wildlife habitats enhanced and the features of international importance protected.
  - iii. Epping Forest will be highly valued as part of a larger and fully accessible protected landscape area.

## Implications

44. **Financial** - under the Environmental Stewardship Scheme, administered by Natural England, the Buffer Land generates points that are anticipated to have contributed around 59% of the Stewardship grant for 2018-19. This income helps to support conservation work including work towards *Favourable Condition* of the Epping Forest Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and *Favourable Conservation Status* of the Special Area of Conservation (SAC), as well as the good management of the Buffer Lands themselves.
45. The combined income generated by the Buffer Lands under the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ES) was £132,354 for 2018-19. This was down from the £165,000 for last year due to the completion of the scheme and an earlier Defra adjustment to the time of the year in which annual payments are allocated. As reported in the CS reports to Committee the income for 2019-20 will be significantly reduced as the forthcoming year falls in the interim period between the two schemes.
46. **Legal** – following the merger under a single business identifier in the previous year there have been no further legal issues raised during the FY 2018-19. Legal issues in the new CS application are the subject of a separate report on that application process.
47. **Property:** The use of a specialist agricultural letting and management consultant is desirable to ensure that the City Corporation receives the best advice to properly manage and maximise the benefit of the agricultural lettings, and ensure that transactions fit within the its overall property requirements and the needs of the Buffer Lands.

## Conclusions

48. The completion of a Parkland Survey and plan proposals for Copped Hall Park marked a significant step forward with the conservation of this site. Further work is being carried out to prepare the proposals for Committee consideration in the next year.
49. Following the increase in cow grazing days in 2017, this reporting year saw another very significant step up in the grazing programme across both the Forest and Buffer Lands. Included in 2018 grazing day totals was the grazing provided by an external licence grazier on Copped Hall south. Looking ahead to 2019, Copped Hall south and its important heritage landscape (Grade II\*) will now be grazed entirely by the in-house conservation herd and 2019 will see a further increase the areas covered.
50. However, the dry weather in the winter 2018-19 means that the grasslands in 2019 are showing very limited growth and grazing periods are likely to be shortened as a result and haylage crops are likely to be significantly reduced in quantity.
51. The importance of the Buffer Lands to the Forest continues to be reflected in the importance given to its protection in the Epping Forest Local Plan. The impacts of the Local Plan have been subject to further submissions to EFDC to ensure that opportunities for enhancing their value to the District are not overlooked.

## **Appendices**

- **Appendix 1:** Epping Forest Buffer Lands Map

## **Background Papers**

- Epping Forest Buffer Lands Action Plan 1998 (approved 13<sup>th</sup> July 1998)

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