

<b>Committee(s):</b> Epping Forest & Commons Committee	<b>Date(s):</b> 09 09 2019
<b>Subject:</b> Epping Forest Countryside Stewardship Grant application 2019 (1 <sup>st</sup> application) – sign-off on the final details of management options (SEF 33-19)	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Colin Buttery, Director of Open Spaces	<b>For Decision</b>
<b>Report authors:</b> Sally Gadsdon, Environmental Stewardship Officer Jeremy Dagley, Head of Conservation	

### Summary

External funding to support the City Corporation's continuing restoration and management of Epping Forest's internationally important habitats is being sought from the government's Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS). The funding would provide a stable source of external income for essential conservation management across a ten-year period (2020-2029). This report outlines the changes to the application since the last report to your Committee in July 2019 (SEF 28-19).

The main change to the previous report (SEF 28-19) is the inclusion of proposed heritage conservation work to Loughton Camp Scheduled Ancient Monument following discussions with, and at the request of, Historic England. This work would involve the removal of scrub that has the potential to cause damage to the buried archaeology of this nationally-important Iron Age hill-fort.

### Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- note the changes to the application details;
- approve the completion and signing of a CSS application for submission to the Rural Payments Agency for its determination.

### Main Report

#### Background

1. A previous Committee report in July (SEF 28-19) set out detailed proposals for a Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) grant application to provide 10 years of funding for conservation and access work on the Forest. The grant application process is complex and, as a result, agreement was reached with Natural England that there should be two separate applications for the Forest. This application covers the key areas that were worked under the previous

Environmental Stewardship Scheme and overall encompasses 41% of Forest Land (1,029 hectares).

2. Since the July report, Epping Forest officers have been working with Natural England to develop and refine the grant application. This work has included agreeing detailed prescriptions for each parcel of Forest Land for which funding for conservation management is being sought. As a result of these discussions there have been modifications to some of the management proposals and some of the areas being included. This report presents an overview of the changes that have been made to the proposals and presents a high-level summary of the application.

### **Current Position**

3. During July and August 2019 Epping Forest officers engaged in highly detailed discussions with both Natural England and Historic England. Natural England accepted the vast majority of the proposals. Historic England were consulted about the management options for the Scheduled Ancient Monument at Loughton Camp to ensure its protection, pending agreement on a full Conservation Management Plan.
4. The final version of the application, with these amendments, was submitted to the Rural Payments Agency on the 31st August 2019 for its verification and cross-checking process. The RPA will prepare a final version of the application to be checked and then signed by Director, to be submitted back to them by 30th September 2019.
5. Subject to a successful application, an agreement for CSS funding would be signed by the Director of Open Spaces between October and December 2019, with a 10-year CSS agreement start date of 1 January 2020.
6. The list below itemises the most significant and key changes (compared to the proposals presented to your Committee in July 2019) that were made to the application.
  - a. It was decided not to apply for funding for Butler's Retreat Pond because the level of funding was very low and the management prescriptions were restricted by tight compliance rules, which would have prevented the most appropriate management for this habitat given the problems of invasive species. Other resources will be investigated to manage this pond.
  - b. Loughton Camp will be included in the application for management of this Iron Age hill-fort. The monument is currently assessed as *vulnerable* by Historic England. The works are aimed at protecting this nationally-important heritage site and preventing an assessment of *at risk*. The management will reduce the risk to the integrity of the earthworks as well as increasing the legibility, or distinctness, of the monument in the landscape for Forest visitors. Management over 10 years would involve the removal of holly, bramble and bracken from within and up to 15m from

the earthworks. There will be proactive public communication to inform visitors of these changes well in advance.

7. Noting that this application is for part of the Forest (see paragraph 1 above), the final headline application details in the August submission were:
  - a. 2,182 ancient pollards to be managed, including 29 ancient beeches specifically for the rare and legally-protected *Zygodon forsteri* moss
  - b. 36 hectares of grassland management
  - c. 10 hectares of heathland management
  - d. 215 hectares of wood pasture management
  - e. 133 hectares of cattle grazing
  - f. Management of scrub on Loughton Camp
  - g. 3 hectares of scrub management
  - h. 4 hectares of bracken management
  - i. Small vegetation scrapes at 3 heathland sites
  - j. Rhododendron clearance at Paul's Nursery
8. The work listed above is essential to the conservation of the Forest and to maintain its internationally-important biodiversity. With the current losses of biodiversity globally this conservation work is becoming even more significant.
9. Epping Forest is also one of the most important sites for ancient tree conservation in western Europe. The ancient tree work being proposed is key to maintaining these trees, preventing the selected *keystone* beech and oak pollards collapsing or being out-competed by other vegetation. The tree-work would also ensure that the hornbeam pollards can continue to re-grow with vigour across a regular pollarding cycle, a traditional practice that, along with grazing and coppicing, has shaped Epping Forest's landscape for over one thousand years.

## Options

- 10.
11. Option 1: Approve the signing and completion of the application by the Director of Open Spaces for submission to Natural England and Rural Payments Agency by 30th September 2019. **This option is recommended.**
12. Option 2: Approval withheld and the final signed application not submitted. **This option is not recommended**

## Proposals

13. It is proposed that your Committee approve Option 1 to allow the application to be submitted by the Director of Open Spaces.

## Corporate & Strategic Implications

14. The Countryside Stewardship Scheme is the UK government's main grant funding scheme to promote protection of the UK's important habitats. CSS is one of Defra's main mechanisms for delivering its Strategic Objective of "a cleaner, healthier environment benefiting people and the economy." It also supports the strategic vision for the 25-year Environment Plan.
15. Our Corporate Plan (2018-2023), whose vision includes "To shape outstanding environments", aims to:
- a. Provide thriving and biodiverse green spaces and urban habitats
  - b. Provide environmental stewardship and advocacy, in use of resources, emissions, conservation, greening, biodiversity and access to nature
  - c. Protect, curate and promote world-class heritage assets
16. The Open Spaces Business Plan 2019-20 includes the outcomes and departmental activities:
- a. Outcome: Our habitats are flourishing, biodiverse and resilient to change
  - b. Outcome: Our open spaces, heritage and cultural assets are protected, conserved and enhanced
  - c. Outcome: Nature, heritage and place are valued and understood
  - d. Activity: Protect and enhance our sites' biodiversity
  - e. Activity: Improve the visitor and cultural offer
17. The works that could be funded by the CSS grant would contribute to fulfilling Our Corporate Plan and the Open Spaces Business Plan:
- a. Work would be undertaken to manage internationally important SAC habitats and populations of veteran trees as well as nationally important SSSI habitats. The aims are to see an improvement in condition of all of these.
  - b. Populations of the rare moss *Zygodon forsteri* will be conserved.
  - c. Work would be undertaken to benefit several scarce species that have increased in number during the time HLS work was undertaken. The aim is that biodiversity will continue to increase during the work funded by CSS and, in so doing, contribute to S41 (UKBAP) priority habitats and species targets.
  - d. In 2020, funding to help conserve a number of historic features will be investigated.
18. The work funded by CSS would help to increase habitats' resilience to environmental change by improving their condition and making them more stable to adapt to future conditions

## Implications

19. **Financial:** If successful, the grant will contribute to the Epping Forest Local Risk Budget, which would be used directly to help deliver the works outlined in the

application. The accompanying non-public report (SEF33/19b) provides a revised budgetary forecast, using indicative and tendered costings from contractors, who would provide specialist assistance with the management operations.

20. In the light of the City's current Fundamental Review process, the CSS grant would be a very significant contribution to the provision of long-term, external financial support, enabling the continuation of essential conservation management for this internationally-important site.
21. **Legal:** The Comptroller & City Solicitor has reviewed the governing terms and conditions of CSS, and its application form, and is satisfied that these are all reasonable.
22. A Habitats Regulation Assessment, to identify any possible detrimental impacts on the SAC, has been undertaken by Natural England. This has determined that the proposed works are entirely consistent with the conservation of the *favourable conservation status* of the site and do not present a risk to the site's qualifying SAC features, on the proviso that all the works are implemented to CSS compliance rules.
23. The proposed works have been granted SSSI consent in anticipation of a succession application.
24. **Charity:** Open Spaces Charity. Epping Forest is a registered charity (number 232990). Charity Law obliges Members to ensure that the decisions they take in relation to the Charity must be taken in the best interests of the Charity.
25. **Exiting the European Union (EEU):** The main EU Directive relating to Epping Forest's conservation management is the Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna & Flora, which is incorporated into UK law as the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (the 'Habitats Regulations'). The future influence of existing EU Directives and the Regulations may be affected by the EU and will also be consequent on the terms reached with the EU as part of Brexit negotiations and the future governments views on 'Retained EU law' contained within the EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018
26. The UK Government has confirmed that it will guarantee funding for Countryside Stewardship agreements if they are agreed and signed before 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020.

## Conclusions

27. The Countryside Stewardship grant presents a valuable opportunity to obtain funding to manage internationally important habitats in Epping Forest to continue and progress the work undertaken through the 10-year Higher Level Environmental Stewardship agreement.

28. Subject to a successful application, an agreement for CSS funding would be signed by the Director of Open Spaces between October and December 2019, with an agreement start date of 1 January 2020.

29. This application covers part of the Forest. A second application for the remaining areas of the Forest will be made in the next few years, along with a third application for the Buffer Lands.

## **Appendices**

- None

## **Background Papers**

- SEF 03-18 Countryside Stewardship Grant Scheme Application
- SEF 22-18 CSS Update May 2018
- SEF 18-19 Countryside Stewardship Grant 2019 application
- SEF 28-19 2019 Countryside Stewardship Grant application proposals

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