

<b>Committee(s)</b>	<b>Dated:</b>
Epping Forest Consultative – For Consultation Epping Forest and Commons – For Decision	29 January 2020 10 March 2020
<b>Subject:</b> Epping Forest Work Programme for 2020/2021 SEF 04/20b	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Colin Buttery, Director of Open Spaces	<b>For Decision</b>
<b>Report authors:</b> Geoff Sinclair and Jeremy Dagley, Epping Forest	

### Summary

The work described in this report covers a large number of the 38 Forest compartments.

The habitat programme is the continuation of several decades of conservation work and a commitment to achieve the *favourable condition* of the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and *favourable conservation status* of the Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The work proposed this year would be part of a new 10-year programme agreed with Natural England and would be supported by a new Countryside Stewardship grant administered by the Rural Payments Agency (RPA). The outcome of this grant bid is still awaited at the time of preparing this report.

The habitat conservation work outlined for the forthcoming year involves work on 353 ancient trees, including the pollarding of ancient hornbeams in several areas where a pollard cycle has been established over the last 30 years. Grassland and heathland management continues to be managed by a combination of extensive grazing by Longhorns and mowing. The mowing work includes the specialist activities of hay-making and fire risk reduction. The varied programme of habitat work will be carried out by a combination of in-house teams, contractors and volunteers.

The access management work outlined covers pathway and wharfing proposals at Highams Park, developing play area proposals for Wanstead Park, a replacement bridge across the River Ching at Whitehall Plain and substantial path network maintenance, particularly in the south of the Forest this year. The risk management work involves the large raised reservoir work, a continuation of the survey and control of the Oak Processionary Moth populations across at least 17 key visitor “hubs” in the Forest and the management of tree safety, which is likely to occupy one arborist team for the whole year.

### Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- i. Approve the annual work programme as summarised in the main report.

## **Main Report**

### **Background**

1. This report describes significant habitat and heritage conservation, visitor access and risk management projects proposed in Epping Forest for the programme year 2020-2021.
2. The work outlined below is drawn from the 2020-2030 Epping Forest Management Strategy and its supporting documents (see *Background* papers below). The habitat work proposed is the result of a detailed review of the previous 10 years of habitat conservation work under the Environmental Stewardship-supported programme. It has involved detailed site condition surveys by your staff and various consultants over the last two years. The habitat conservation proposals put forward have been agreed with Natural England and are determined by Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) *Favourable Condition* and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) *Favourable Conservation Status* priorities.
3. The access and safety work proposals also follow detailed fieldwork.

### **Current Position**

4. A 10-year Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) grant application was submitted at the end of August 2019 to Natural England and the Rural Payments Agency (RPA). The grant application sought both revenue and capital funding for a habitat management and conservation programme. At the time of this report the application is awaiting approval by the RPA. The habitat work outlined in this report is based on a successful outcome of this grant bid process and would need to be modified in the light of any changes that the RPA might propose and that might be agreed.
5. A total of 189 ha of our grass and haylage cutting and the bulk of our highway verge cutting is now undertaken by local contractors Warren Smith Farming Ltd and Bush Wheeler Services respectively. Following a tender process, three-year agreements were made in 2018 with these local enterprises to deliver these works.

### **Proposals**

6. Based on the grant application described above, the proposed 2020-21 habitat programme focuses on taking forward the new 10-year CSS ancient tree management and wood-pasture restoration programmes, consolidating the Longhorn cattle breeding herd and ensuring a full grazing programme across the Buffer Lands and those Forest grasslands, heathlands and wood-pastures with suitable fencing controls (invisible, electric, wooden/wire).
7. The 2020-21 programme also seeks to continue to manage potential risks, particularly those related to woody vegetation on highway verges, tree pests and diseases, fly-tipping and tree safety. We will also be working on increasing the pre-emptive and planned responses to risks associated with Forest paths and

tree root nuisance claims, both of which give rise to a significant number of our insurance claims.

8. Following the completion of the Individual Site Management Plans (ISMP) for Theydon Bois Green, Leyton Flats and Highams Park, work priorities will be incorporated into the Forest Management Plan as resources and any further consents or permissions from or joint-working arrangements with external authorities and other stakeholders allow.
9. Following retendering in 2018, and the subsequent good performance of the contractors involved, it is proposed that we continue with bulk contracts for highway verge cutting and grassland management.

### **A Beautiful Wood Pasture - Wood pasture restoration**

10. Should the CSS grant application be successful and without modifications, we would aim to deliver the following habitat conservation programme (see also map at **Appendix 1**) for the period up to March 2021:
11. Undertake re-pollarding work on 353 pollarded trees, comprised of 64 *keystone* trees (beech and oak), 81 in-cycle hornbeam pollards and 208 lapsed hornbeam pollards. Much of this work will be undertaken by the Epping Forest arborist team. This work on the Forest's ancient pollards will be carried out in Bury Wood, Honey Lane Quarters, Powell's Forest, Paul's Nursery, Woodchip Ride and North Long Hills.
12. Maintenance of up to 140 ha of restored wood-pasture through cutting of vegetation (e.g. bramble) by tractor mounted flail. This work would be undertaken by a combination of in-house teams and contractors. The exact acreage cut during the late summer will be determined by a site review to assess which sites require an annual cut and which others may require a rotational cut every other year or longer. The impact of the cattle grazing in the wood-pasture areas of Bury Wood will also be assessed as this should obviate the need for cutting in some of these wood-pasture areas.
13. There will also be additional work, with further wood-pasture restoration carried out in Bury Wood, North Long Hills, Honey Lane Quarters and Warren Hill. This work, involving tree-felling to thin out younger trees and other vegetation around overstood pollards as well as the creation of a new generation of pollards would be undertaken by contractors, following a competitive procurement process during spring and summer 2020.
14. Rhododendron removal would be completed in two areas of wood-pasture at Paul's Nursery, High Beach and St Thomas' Quarters to ensure that Ramorum disease cannot take hold at these two important areas of ancient beech pollards.

### **Grassland and Heathland Management**

15. Open grass areas across the Forest will be cut using a similar programme as in previous years, with the notable addition of the new wild-flower meadow at

Whipps Cross, that was recently returned to the Forest by the London Borough of Waltham Forest from highway dedication as part of its new bus turnaround and cycleway “mini-Holland” development. Dependent on ground conditions, this is likely to require at least a single cut-and-remove once the annuals in the mix have flowered. Further work will also be carried out, as resources allow, to connect this new grassland area to the grassy glades north of Hollow Pond and to the restoration area of Cow Pond (see *Ponds* section below).

16. For the general grass programme, we will be seeking to increase the area cut by contractors, especially from mid to late summer to free up staff time to focus on the maintenance of wood-pasture by tractor mounted flailing. Currently, the contractors undertake around 50% of the mowing by area (72 hectares).
17. In selected heathlands and some of the wood-pasture areas bracken spraying would be carried out to continue the control of this invasive species and to ensure that tree regeneration and other flora can be promoted.
18. At both Leyton Flats and Wanstead Flats, in addition to the mowing work to sustain the grassland habitat, fire control zones will be consolidated around the margins of the sites and along the main access routes. The Wanstead Flats mowing regime, in particular, was reviewed in 2019 for a number of reasons and a new rotational mowing regime implemented:
  - 18.1 To reduce the wildfire risk of the site by reducing the presence of over-mature gorse and broom, especially dead material close to the boundaries of the site, and the amount of old grass or thatch in the sward;
  - 18.2 To promote specialist heathland and acid grassland plants through controlling ruderal plants and coarse grasses, in particular, that established following the emergency sub-soiling undertaken as part of the wildfire control works in 2018;
  - 18.3 To maintain areas of good quality for Skylark and Meadow Pipit nesting (both species are declining nationally and locally).

### **Volunteer Habitat Management Activity**

19. Connected with the work on acid grasslands in the south of the Forest, it is hoped that staff will be able to continue to work with The Wren Conservation Group and others as volunteers monitoring the singing Skylark and Meadow Pipit numbers, as well as the important migratory bird passage on Wanstead Flats.
20. At Wanstead Park Exchange Land support and advice will continue to be given to The Wren Conservation Group in its excellent volunteer conservation work on the grassland mosaic there, restoring butterfly habitats for species such as the Brown Argus. We also propose working with local community stakeholders to identify the range of management issues and opportunities at the exchange lands and to produce an outline development plan to complement the Wanstead Park Parkland Plan produced in 2019.

21. The Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers (EFCV) will also continue their varied and invaluable task programme across the Forest, focusing on the wood-pasture restoration areas, heathlands, ponds and bogs. Their work on wetland sites, in particular, has been critical to the maintenance of the special wildlife interest in these places.
22. The Swaines Green volunteers, Highams Park Snedders and Epping Forest Heritage Trust volunteers also undertake significant works in various parts of the Forest and help to deliver a range of projects to improve the local environment, for both habitats and access, as part of agreed work programmes.
23. During 2020 the Epping Forest Volunteer Wardens will continue with their work on site patrol, auditing of the condition of the path network and cattle monitoring. A programme of pond management works concentrating on ponds in amenity areas will be developed during 2020 with the intention of the volunteer wardens undertaking works from the winter of 2020/21.

## Grazing

24. The main aim of the grazing programme (see **Appendix 2**) will be to ensure extensive grazing rotated through the summer across the three large areas bordered by invisible-fencing at Fairmead, Bury Wood and Chingford Plain/Dannett's Hill. Grazing will also be rotated around the northern heathland sites which form an important component feature of the Special Area of Conservation designation. Grazing dates are to be varied from previous years with later start dates to ensure variation in the management to favour insect diversity and flowering (see Appendix 2). All grazing dates will be influenced by the weather and the related grass growth.
25. Subject to funding and staff resources, a *trial* grazing project will be implemented on the East Plain at Wanstead Park. An approximately 1800m *Boviguard*<sup>™</sup> invisible fencing (IF) loop will be installed at The Plain with the intention that cattle would graze during a few weeks in the late autumn/winter. The intention would be for the operation to begin after September 2020 for a period of the 2020/21 winter, with a review of the project in 2021. Installing the *Boviguard*<sup>™</sup> cable will require Archaeological Priority Area (APA) permission. Although the cable is buried no deeper than 15cm (6 inches), a walk-over survey would be conducted, as has been the case with previous IF cable laying in the Forest. In addition, a supervising archaeologist would be present on the day of the installation.
26. It is hoped this will provide a solution to managing this important area of acid grassland, with its distinctive ant-hills and important butterfly populations, as well as testing a way forward for managing other areas in the Park such as The Long Walk. This project will require a considerable amount of practical community support, as well as consultation.

## **Ponds/Lakes/Bogs**

27. Monthly monitoring for Floating Pennywort at Wanstead Park will be continued during 2020 using a specialist contractor, with any outbreaks responded to as they appear.
28. During 2020 we will be working with colleagues from the City Surveyor's Department to progress design proposals to stabilise the substantial bankside erosion problems at Jubilee Pond. Additionally, at Highams Park with support from the City Surveyors Department we will be looking at a combination of 'hard' and 'soft' wharfing along the lake edge to reduce erosion of the bank and to improve water and habitat quality. Hard wharfing is the more traditional timber edge while soft wharfing is the use of plants to create a natural protective edge. Specialist assessments were completed in 2019 which outline the work requirements. Consent would be sought from Natural England once details are finalised.
29. In addition, there will be further work with the City Surveyors drawing up plans for work on the dam at Deer Sanctuary (Birch Hall Park) Pond. This work will aim to repair and stabilise the dam and improve the spillway. This would be subject to separate consultation as part of a costed capital project process.
30. The charity *Froglife* was successful in securing match-funding for its Heritage Lottery Fund grant. The restoration of Cow Pond, which would involve some deepening of the central pond area and a re-shaping of the margins, is now planned to begin in 2020 once a trial borehole has checked water levels. This pond work will be complemented, as resources allow, by work to improve access and open up scrub habitats and glades in the surrounding oak woodland leading to the wild-flower meadow opposite the new Whipps Cross bus station and cycleway.

## **Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) work**

31. Monitoring of Oak Processionary Moth (OPM), using external consultants, would continue over at least 17 main sites as in 2019, with control measures taken as required. It is expected to see a year on year increase in the number of trees affected and the number of OPM nests. Removal of nests will be targeted to where the most immediate risks of exposure to visitors are found.
32. Ramorum monitoring will be continued across all Rhododendron sites, both existing and historic, including Knighton Woods, Wanstead Park and The Warren Plantation. In addition, further Rhododendron removal work is to be completed at two small sites in the northern parts of the Forest' wood-pasture (see paragraph 11 above).
33. The annual Japanese Knotweed control will be carried out across the 3 remaining sites – with older sites being re-checked.
34. A programme of managing New Zealand Pygmy Weed (*Crassula helmsii*) on prominent, largely amenity ponds, will be undertaken based on volunteers undertaking the work. The objective will be to maintain the extent of this invasive

weed to as small an area as practically achievable. Strategies for eradicating this pernicious plant have so far proved elusive.

### **A Welcoming Destination:**

#### Ride and Path Management

35. A path management Policy Development Note (PDN) will be completed for the Spring of 2020 following an audit of paths in 2018. This has taken longer than anticipated to prepare as following the audit and subsequent review the path network has been revised to 189km rather than the previously quoted 80 km .
36. Routine maintenance of path edge vegetation will be continued across the whole network. The works to reduce encroaching and overhanging woody vegetation started in 2019 will be continued in 2020 with the focus of activity being towards the south of the Forest, compartments 33 (Highams), 34 (Walthamstow Forest), and 35 (Gilbert's Slade).
37. Drainage issues identified in the 2018 audit will be assessed during the 2020 and an improvement programme developed. Works are likely to be undertaken by contractors and the cost of this will be assessed during 2020 and implemented as funds allow during this year. Any drainage work considered in the SAC/SSSI areas would be subject to consultation with Natural England.

#### Whitehall Plain Bridge

38. In association with the Department of the Built Environment we will continue to look at erecting a new bridge or raised boardwalk across the River Ching on Whitehall Plain in the location of the deteriorating culvert bridge. The work on the design proposals has continued from 2018. In addition to the river crossing, sections of the paths leading to the bridge have been cut through by drainage grips creating muddy, deep hollows in places. Improvements over these eroded sections will be reviewed as possible additions to the bridge works. Once design options have been finalised the proposals would be put forward to Natural England for consent and the Environment Agency as required.

### **Protected and Celebrated Heritage Landscapes**

#### Wanstead Park: Parkland Plan

39. The Parkland Plan was completed and approved by the EF &CC in November 2019. The plan draws together an extensive body of research and stakeholder feedback to identify a strategy to seek the removal of Wanstead Park from the Heritage at Risk register and to identify how best the partners can access external funding programmes. The plan will be a key resource guiding the investment decisions of the Wanstead Park Project Board.
40. The timetable for implementing the parkland plan proposals is likely to be protracted. Working through the Wanstead Park Liaison Group an interim programme of improvement works that are likely to be achievable within existing resources has been identified as a means of maintaining momentum and local

community support. The works proposed for being developed and implemented during 2020-21 are as follows:

- 40.1 Play area: If external funding for a play area is not forthcoming in the foreseeable future it is proposed that a simple natural play area based on timber from Epping Forest and installed by in-house staff be undertaken.
- 40.2 Water supply management: Works started in 2019 to improve the drainage of water into the lake system at Wanstead Park will be continued. Existing drainage outlets will be identified, cleaned and the flow of water from them increased as conditions allow.
- 40.3 Signage: Following on from the successful signage works at Highams park, funded by a grant obtained by the Highams Park Planning Group, we will work with the Friends of Wanstead Parklands to obtain and install around ten new directional signs in the park.
- 40.4 Vegetation management: Targeted work to open up key vistas and paths will be continued.

#### Highams Park

41. Proposals for a north-south multi-user surfaced path will be outlined in the Paths Policy Development Note that will be prepared for consideration by the EFCC and the EF & CC in the Spring of 2020. Following consideration of the proposals it is proposed that we work with local volunteers to seek funding for any proposals through the Park including either the restoration of the west bank original estate coach drive or following the strong 'wish way' on the east side of the lake.
42. Any work proposals in Highams Park, which is part of the SSSI and SAC and a locally listed Park, would require consent from Natural England and the London Borough of Waltham Forest, and may also require further consultations locally.

#### Churchill Avenue: Woodford Green

43. A community and stakeholder information process was undertaken in 2019 on proposals for the phased replacement, for tree safety reasons, of the London Plane and Poplar tree avenue at Woodford Green. Proposals have been submitted to the London Borough of Redbridge for permission to undertake the work however agreement was not forthcoming in time for the work to be undertaken in 2019 as originally planned.
44. It is proposed that we undertake the phased replanting of the avenue with Common Lime (*Tilia x europea*) with work commencing in September 2020.



## **A Resilient Environment:**

### Highway Verge Management

45. Ongoing maintenance of highways edge vegetation will largely be contracted out through a three-year agreement with a local provider. In-house teams will focus on the more challenging locations where there are a number of constraints such as frequent parked cars and on maintaining sightlines at path and road junctions. One significant task started in 2019 and to be completed in 2020 is the management of roadside elm alongside Bell Common, Epping. The dead and dying elm is to be felled and the boundary vegetation subsequently managed as a hedge to reduce long term concerns over dead elm impacting on the road carriageway.

### Tree Safety

46. Trees identified for hazard removal will be a significant proportion of spring and summer programmes for the Arborist Teams. The annual tree safety survey programme is undertaken by contractors and this is to be retendered this year on a three-year basis. Overall, works to make good hazardous trees takes up the equivalent of one arborist team's year.

### Fire Safety

47. As described above under *Grasslands* management, fire control zones will continue to be mown at Leyton and Wanstead Flats, with the areas managed (including the 6km of routes already cut annually) refined by a survey carried out in 2019 by a specialist fire management consultant. Along the key routes around the edges of these two large grassland sites, grass will either be cut regularly to ensure a short sward along the routes for a 6m width or grass cuttings will be removed after each main cut (depending on the area mown).
48. In addition, areas of older and dead gorse will be cut back and incorporated in regular flailing work at Leyton Flats, particularly the areas of gorse in the south of the Flats close to the boundary pathways.
49. Other areas of open land in the Forest, including Chingford Plain and the heathland sites were also risk assessed. The existing management at these smaller sites was enough for the control of fire risk. All the risk assessments and associated mapping will be provided to the local fire service for their approval prior to summer 2020.

### Insurance Claims

50. A Vegetation Against Property (VAP) Policy Development Note has been prepared for this same committee. This outlines our work to manage the potentially significant financial liabilities arising from tree root nuisance claims with new claims currently occurring every four to six weeks.
51. In addition to the case by case response process we commenced work in 2019 to reduce the tree cover along Mays Lane, Chingford. Reducing the tree cover will help to reduce subsidence and tree safety liabilities and will also provide the

opportunity to improve a currently overlooked part of the Forest. Ironically not long after work was scheduled, we received a root nuisance claim arising from Mays Lane.

#### Large Raised Reservoirs (LRR):

52. Woody and herbaceous vegetation will be kept cut on raised reservoirs. Further works will follow on from the six-monthly Panel Engineer inspections and will be undertaken in association with the Built Environment Department. In line with requirements in our water abstraction licence from the EA we will continue works to improve the flow of water to the lakes via the local drainage network. This will involve some improvement to ditches to ensure the water flows more directly to the lakes and investigation of drainage pipes out falling into the lakes to check they are running smoothly.
53. Working practice and policy regarding our management of LRR's will be brought together into LRR Policy Development Note in 2020 (see also para 26 above concerning the dam at Deer Sanctuary Pond).

#### **Corporate & Strategic Implications**

54. 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
55. The Open Spaces Business Plan 2019-20 includes the outcomes and departmental activities:
  - a. Outcome: Our habitats are flourishing, biodiverse and resilient to
  - b. change
  - c. Outcome: Our open spaces, heritage and cultural assets are protected,
  - d. conserved and enhanced
  - e. Outcome: Nature, heritage and place are valued and understood
  - f. Activity: Protect and enhance our sites' biodiversity
  - g. Activity: Improve the visitor and cultural offer
56. The work programme outlined in this report involves the activities described above and seeks to meet all the Corporate and Business Plan objectives. In particular the programme aims to protect biodiversity whilst improving opportunities for visitors to enjoy the Forest. The programme is also set out according to the new Strategy and Management Plan for Epping Forest 2020-30. The proposals meet a wide range of outcomes identified in this Plan, with the proposals detailed under each of the Plan's five 'Strategic Priorities'.

## Implications

57. **Financial:** The work outlined in the proposed work programme is to be covered by the local risk budget of Epping Forest Division and both revenue and capital funding through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, administered by the Rural Payments Agency. Additional grant aid and public fundraising would be sought where available to fund agreed activity.
58. **Legal:** Formal consent for these works has been sought from Natural England under Section 28E of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) for the SSSI and as required under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 in relation to the SAC. Additional consents for work in locally listed landscapes and APAs will be sought during the year. Any work on main watercourses would be carried out with the agreement of the Environment Agency.
59. **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.

## Conclusions

60. The habitat work programme outlined above has been the subject of a detailed review of the previous ten years of conservation work carried out under the Environmental Stewardship Scheme. It has involved detailed consultations with Natural England, extensive field survey work and reflects the key priorities for the protection of the Site of Special Scientific Interest and Special Area of Conservation. It incorporates the proposals which have been put forward as part of a new 10-year Countryside Stewardship grant application.
61. The access and risk management work proposals also reflect the outcome of detailed fieldwork and regular surveys of the condition of the Forest's infrastructure and boundaries.
62. Volunteers will continue to be instrumental in delivering a significant proportion of the work on a number of key projects in 2019/20, including wood-pasture restoration and ponds work and their important contribution is acknowledged.
63. In-house teams will deliver much of the work detailed in the report. Contractors will be used to support implementation of the grass-cutting and highway vegetation management works and will contribute significantly to the implementation of the proposed new CSS programme.

## Appendices

- Appendix 1: Map of distribution of habitat management work.
- Appendix 2: proposed Grazing Programme (subject to weather & ground conditions)

## Background Papers

- A Strategy and Management Plan for Epping Forest 2020-30
- SEF28/19 Epping Forest & Commons Committee Report: Countryside Stewardship Grant 2019 Proposals
- The Barn Hoppitt Wood-pasture Restoration Plan 2006-2011;
- The Lords Bushes and Knighton Woods Integrated Site Plan 2004-2010;
- The Wanstead Flats Individual Site Management Plan (2020);
- Theydon Bois Green Individual Site Management Plan (2018)
- Highams Park, Little Sale and Oak Hill Woods Individual Site Management Plan (2019)
- Leyton Flats Individual Site Management Plan (2019)
- Branching Out Stage II Project Plan (Nov 2008) – including the Keystone Trees and Grazing Strategies;
- SEF 01/13 Epping Forest & Commons Committee Report: Grazing Expansion Plan for Implementing the Epping Forest Grazing Strategy. 13th Feb 2013.
- Wanstead Park Conceptual Options Plan (2019);
- SEF 50/16 Epping Forest & Commons Committee Report: Epping Forest Grazing Expansion Plan Continuity Arrangements. 21st November 2016
- The Topology and Vegetational History of Some Epping Forest Sphagnum Bogs (Report to EF Conservators - K.J. Adams 2017).
- Highway Verge Management Policy Development Note (2018)

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