

<b>1. Committee(s):</b>	<b>Date(s):</b>
Epping Forest & Commons Committee	6 July 2020
<b>Subject:</b> Superintendent's Update	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Superintendent of 'The Commons'	<b>For Information</b>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Summary</b></p> <p>This report provides a general update on issues across the nine sites within 'The Commons' division that may be of interest to members and is supplementary to the monthly email updates.</p> <p><b>Recommendation</b> Members are asked to note the contents of this report.</p>	

### **Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common as of the 15<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

1. Volunteer Group activity at Burnham Beeches and Stoke common was suspended in mid-March as the Coronavirus outbreak began to develop. Volunteer group activity remains suspended. Some individual volunteering activity involving 'remote sign in and out' and aimed at aiding very specific tasks (livestock lookers/ ecological survey) restarted in June 2020.
2. Following the implementation of lockdown policies on the evening of Monday 23 March the car parks at Burnham Beeches closed at end of the day on Tuesday 24 March.
3. During the early part of lockdown Burnham Beeches was quieter than normal, though still being used by large numbers of local people walking, cycling & running to the site for allowed exercise. Stoke Common was busier than normal, probably as a result of local County Council parks close by being closed at that time.
4. During most of April litter and nuisance issues were of a low level and most visitors here abiding by requests to take litter away with them. However, in May with the relaxation of lockdown and prior to that the revision of guidance by the Police as to what constituted a reason to travel, Burnham Beeches in particular saw a substantial increase in visitors trying to access the site by car. This resulted in an increase in the number of vehicles parking, often dangerously, on surrounding verges and local roads. All such parking on City land was prevented by physical means where possible and challenged by Rangers to prevent damage to the open space.

5. The car parks at Burnham Beeches reopened on 18 May. Visitor numbers since that point have been estimated at 3 x above normal level all days of the week. This has resulted in an accompanying 3 x increase in litter and waste through May and June and a 3 x increase in the number of incidents of misuse dealt with by the Ranger team. Incident numbers tailed off a little with wetter days in early June
6. Car park charges were restarted on the first weekend in June once pay by phone operations had been introduced to all car parks thereby supplementing the existing 'cash only' payment option. Around 50% of car park income is now through the Pay by Phone provider. Visitor numbers have remained at their high levels of approximately 3x usual levels throughout June to date.
7. The cafe at Burnham Beeches was closed on the evening of 23 March. However, with relaxation of lockdown the café reopened on the 3 June as a 'takeaway kiosk service', with a reduced menu, and with an appropriate one way, socially distanced queuing system in place. Despite these 'restrictions' the café report that to date, June has provided their best business since they took over the cafe operations in April 2019.
8. Signage advising of the need for closure and for social distancing has been erected and updated throughout the period. Website and social media have been used to update visitors throughout and after the lockdown.
9. Until lockdown restrictions were eased site staff cover was generally restricted to the Duty Ranger plus office cover backed up by others on call and working at home if necessary. This was effectively a minimum 'holiday period level of cover', but for every day of the week. Support Service Team and the Conservation Officer were working from home.
10. As lockdown was eased and car parks reopened the Ranger team have begun to return to more a normal working pattern albeit with staggered rotas. Other staff, previously exclusively working from home have returned to count cash from car park machines. The office layout has been revised to maximise and embed social distancing into normal working lives. The early and late duty Rangers have continued to be kept separate throughout and various social distancing measures have been introduced for all staff attending the workplace
11. Onsite the team has continued focus on managing immediate health and safety risks, site presence for visitors, livestock care, site protection and essential monitoring. However, the amount of this work has increased, and site maintenance operations have also needed to be undertaken. The cows and ponies have now returned to the Beeches and cows to Stoke Common. This includes cows in invisible fencing loops at Burnham Beeches. Grazing is required to meet grant conditions of the countryside stewardship grant for both sites.

12. Buckinghamshire became a Unitary Authority as of 1 April, with the dissolution of the District Councils, on 31 March and is called Buckinghamshire Council (BC). However, council elections were cancelled, and Officers are fulfilling interim roles so there has understandably been some hiatus in services over the last few months.
13. Despite this, progress has recently been made regarding local planning issues albeit the public hearing for the South Bucks District Council (SBDC) Local Plan was cancelled although correspondence has continued. The Inspectors considered that the Duty to Co-operate was not fulfilled but SBDC (now BC) have disputed this and asked that discussion around it be heard face to face with the Local Plan Inspector and not via virtual meetings. As a result, the plan is held up for an indefinite length of time and is currently considered to have very limited weight.
14. To ensure compliance with the Habitats Regulations BC have decided to produce a Development Policy Document outlining the recent evidence regarding the impact of recreation pressure on Burnham Beeches and stipulating the 500m no build zone and the 500m to 5.6km contributions zone around Burnham Beeches SAC (as previously agreed with CoL and Natural England). There will need to be a consultation period but, as Natural England are supportive and some key developers have already agreed in principle, it is hoped this will progress smoothly.
15. In the meantime, BC have many planning applications that are yet to be decided (because they now need to be refused or contribution payments made). They are working hard to ensure all the paperwork is in place and will soon start to inform applicants of the new situation.
16. Planning consent for the Horlicks Factory in Slough has been granted with a s106 agreement providing funds for an 'Ambassador' Ranger post (5-year full time, fixed term contract) at Burnham Beeches to influence the behaviour of visitors for the better protection of the SAC. CoL officers are working to ensure that everything is in place to start the appointment process for the Ranger as soon as the money has been received.
17. A meeting was held regarding an application for a further large development in Slough (Akzonobel Factory) where various proposals were suggested for mitigating the impacts of recreation pressure on Burnham Beeches. Some of the options are being explored further.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

### **Kenley Revival update**

18. Although the entire spring and summer programme of events, talks and educational activities was cancelled, the Legacy Officer continues to work with volunteers to research and produce articles, newsletters and printed resources to engage people

with the story of Kenley Airfield. A leaflet has been produced to accompany the new onsite signage and new articles are regularly posted on the website. Currently work is underway to produce a collection of memorial signs for display on site to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Britain.

19. Efforts to resolve the defects affecting the conservation work continue. Expert opinion on the rare variant of sulphate attack responsible for the deterioration has been unable to determine the precise design failure that caused the problem. Officers continue to work with Beale & Co to pursue a satisfactory outcome.
20. Allsigns, the company manufacturing and installing the onsite signage, ceased operations due to Covid-19. They have now resumed work and are producing a revised timetable for our project.

### **The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons**

21. All Volunteer Group activity and events on the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons remain suspended. Individual volunteers have been checking livestock throughout the week alone which has helped support the duties of the Ranger team.
22. Gated car parks at Farthing Downs, Riddlesdown and Spring Park have been reopened as of Friday 15 May following the announcement of the lockdown restrictions easing.
23. During most of April, litter and nuisance issues were of a low level and most visitors abided by requests to take litter away with them. However, in May with the relaxation of lockdown all the Commons saw a substantial increase in visitors trying to access the site by car and thus increases in associated litter. On Farthing Downs this resulted in an increase in the number of vehicles parking, often dangerously, on surrounding verges and local roads without the regular assistance from the local authority enforcement which we had during lockdown to challenge this behaviour.
24. There were several incidents of anti-social behaviour across the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons on Monday 18th May requiring Rangers to call the emergency services. This incurred several cars driving dangerously in the grassed overflow car park at Farthing Downs. As a response to this and similar incidents prior to lockdown, the overflow car park has remained closed and incidents of this nature have abated.
25. The main herd of Sussex cattle having been grazing on Woodplace Farm fields for several months during bulling and have been given reflective leg bands before moving onto Farthing Downs until Autumn. The remaining herds of cattle and sheep have been grazing compartments across the Coulsdon Commons to fulfil the obligations of the Countryside Stewardship Agreements currently in place.

26. Contractors have completed works to install electric cabling under a portion of land between Riddlesdown Road and the Car Park on Riddlesdown. The works are part of the necessary infrastructure for the introduction of parking charge system due onsite later in the year. An earth bank has also been added to deter unwanted vehicles from accessing the Common and amenity grassland area at the back of the car park.
27. Rangers have been undertaking essential duties on the Commons including infrastructure checks, repairs to fences and gates as well as cutting grass areas and verges, maintaining a presence for visitors and keeping sites clean. Onsite Rangers have worked alone and maintained social distancing from team members during tasks where more than one person is required using separate vehicles. Staff who can work from home have been doing so.
28. The final phase of the chalk grassland restoration of Hilltop on Kenley Common is complete. The Rangers have used a Seppi mower to grind down stumps and some branches that were left after the clearance of the ash trees affected by Ash Dieback disease. Over the next few years, it is likely that many of the rare orchids will establish.
29. Signage advising of the need for continued social distancing following the updated government advice has been displayed throughout the period on noticeboards and gates. The website and social media have been used to update visitors throughout and after the lockdown.
30. The West Wickham Commons Ranger has surveyed Spring Park for any presence of OPM following a positive sighting of nests onsite last year. Bromley Council have been following up on sightings with spraying on neighbouring Sparrow's Den to control the species.

## **Ashtead Common**

31. Ashtead Common has experienced significantly higher visitor numbers since movement restrictions were imposed. The Common does not have a car park and is predominantly used by local people who walk to the site, although now in much greater numbers since they have fewer options to go elsewhere.
32. Generally, behaviour has been good, and visitors have respected social distancing restrictions and the byelaws of the Common.
33. Since March 23 staff cover has generally been restricted to one person in the workplace at any one time, backed up by others on duty and working at home if

necessary. This is effectively a weekend level of cover, but for every day of the week. One team member has found it difficult to work at home, and since 21 April this person has been allowed to work at the office in isolation from other staff. Arrangements have been validated and a Blue Certificate is now displayed at the Estate Office.

- 34. Onsite the team has focussed primarily on managing immediate health and safety risks. An example of this is tree safety. Since movement restrictions came into force the team has dealt with six tree failure incidents, including the loss of one veteran tree.
- 35. A second tier of pressing health and safety issues, most notably the very high fire risk of recent weeks have necessitated the need to continue with mowing.
- 36. Those working at home have had plenty of work to progress, including the first draft of the next management plan and analysis of a recently received revision to the veteran tree management plan.
- 37. Two members of staff have now been tested for Covid-19. Both tests were negative.

### **Support Services Team**

- 38. The team are continuing working from home, however, with the re-opening of the car parks at Burnham Beeches the Head Ranger for the site requested assistance to count cash collected from the car park machines. This currently requires one team member to go into the office once per week.
- 39. The team continues to be busy sourcing and procuring specialist Covid 19 PPE and supplies ensuring the operations teams are sufficiently prepared and protected when working out on site and in the office.
- 40. As Government guidelines change queries from members of public increase and the team, constantly updating information resources, continue to handle numerous enquiries using correct and up to date information.

### **Incidents**

#### **Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common**

- 41. There were 37 incidents in May and 8 up to 15 June.
- 42. There were an increase in fly tipping incidents -16– many of a relatively small (both from a car) scale no doubt due to closure of the local amenity waste site 1 mile from

the Beeches boundary – incident numbers have reduced since this facility re-opened.

- 43. Other incidents included 6 fires all thankfully small campfire sized often associated with BBQs. 5 dog related incidents – resulting in 3 formal PSPO warning letters being sent.
- 44. The remaining incidents are a miscellaneous collection which included site damage , large groups gathering for parties, a search for a teenager whose mental wellbeing was a concern and an incident of a drunk teenager falling in a ditch prompting a full emergency service rescue response as her companions reported that she had fallen into one of the ponds.

### **Ashtead Common**

- 45. There have been three minor fires, one of which was attended by the Fire Service.

### **The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons**

- 46. There were 21 incidents covering the period of May to 17 June.
- 47. Following the lift on travel restrictions, several incidents were related to large gatherings and anti-social behaviour. A group of approximately 20 individuals who were driving dangerously in the Farthing Downs overflow car park, a large gathering of teenagers drinking on West Wickham Common and a gathering of 20 individuals on Coulsdon Common watching quad-bikers required Rangers to call the Police.
- 48. There have been ongoing incidents involving potential activity linked to wildlife crimes. Suspicious activity around badger setts on Woodplace Farm Fields have been reported by residents. Posters informing people to call the police and report suspicious behaviours have been put up at entrances to the fields on Farthing Downs..
- 49. A sewage leak from overflowing drains is being dealt with by Thames Water on Lower Woodplace Farm Fields on 16 and 17 June.. Thames Water have been given access to operate from drains across the stretch covering Farthing Downs.
- 50. Three incidents of fly tipped green waste were dealt with by Rangers.
- 51. Other incidents included Rangers assisting paramedics with a biking injury, metal detecting on West Wickham Common, a bonfire and two acts of vandalism on a fence post in the Spring Park car park and the electronic gates at Farthing Downs

following a car which had been locked-in overnight. Due to a problem with the Riddlesdown car park gate, both car park gates are opened manually by the Rangers each morning and locked nightly.

## **Filming, major events and other activities**

### **Burnham Beeches**

52. All events and filming are suspended at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common.

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