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| <b>Committee(s)</b>   | <b>Dated: 18 January 2021</b>     |
| Committee name – Epping Forest & Commons Committee  |                                   |
| <b>Subject:</b> 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. | <b>Public</b>                     |
| <b>Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?</b><br><br><b>Contribute to a flourishing society</b><br><b>Shape outstanding environments</b>      | <b>1,2,3,4</b><br><b>10,11,12</b> |
| <b>Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?</b>  | <b>No</b>                         |
| <b>If so, how much?</b>   | <b>N/A</b>                        |
| <b>What is the source of Funding?</b>   |                                   |
| <b>Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?</b>   | <b>N/A</b>                        |
| <b>Report of Colin Buttery, Director of Open Spaces Department</b>  | <b>For Information</b>            |
| <b>Report author: Andy Barnard, Superintendent of The Commons</b>   |                                   |

### **Summary**

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.

### **Recommendations**

Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

### **Main Report**

#### **Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common**

1. Volunteer Group activity at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common has ceased again due to the Tier 4 restrictions. Prior to this a single Christmas task was

held at Stoke Common for regular volunteers who worked in small groups (6 or fewer).

2. Visitor numbers have been phenomenally high across the entire holiday period, far higher than usual. Car parks have been full by mid-morning and the trampling pressure on paths is giving cause for concern, especially in relation to the old trees. Litter bins are requiring emptying every day instead of the normal once per week. The busy nature of the site has resulted in more instances of Rangers needing to remind visitors of site byelaws.
3. The cafe at Burnham Beeches has remained open as a 'takeaway kiosk service' although all tables and chairs have been removed. It has been very popular over the holiday period.
4. The new car parking system with 7 day a week charges and use of ANPR (automatic number plate recognition) on Lord Mayors went live on 5<sup>th</sup> December. This required a complete change of signage as well as the installation of the infrastructure for new machines and the ANPR equipment. There have been a few initial teething problems with the purchase of season tickets and registering blue badges, but the office has been able to resolve these issues. The system has been thoroughly tested with visitor levels around 4 times higher than normal over the Christmas period.
5. The Supplementary Planning Document regarding the mitigation for the impact of recreation pressure approved by Buckinghamshire Council is now undergoing the statutory three month period during which a judicial review can be requested. Two planning applications (one in each of the zones) went to appeal. The appeal was dismissed for one and the results of the other are still awaited.
6. Slough Borough Council have opened the consultation on their Spatial strategy which is the first step towards a Local Plan. A response has been submitted stressing the importance of dealing appropriately with increasing impact of recreation pressure as a result of new housing and also the need to consider air quality in a full Habitats Regulations Assessment.
7. The Ranger team continued to work to a slightly modified shift pattern until the Christmas period. Other staff continue to mix working from home with working in the office to ensure maximum efficiency whilst reducing risk. The office has become increasingly busy so ensuring support staff are in each day has now become essential. This situation will need to be revised now the Tier 5 restrictions are in place.

8. The ponies are currently grazing on the West part of Stoke Common where they are doing a good job of eating gorse (after the horse dentist paid a visit to check their teeth). The cattle are off site in their winter quarters with a local farmer. Sadly, one of the older cows had a suspected dislocated hip and had to be put down.
9. Preparations have been made for the veteran tree works and all the clearance of surrounding vegetation, including high clearance of over-hanging trees has been completed and cleared up. Work on the old trees themselves starts at the beginning of January using a hired high lift platform. Some scrub control has continued on Stoke Common.
10. Contractors have worked on an area of wood pasture restoration adjacent to Lord Mayor's Drive. Trees have been thinned out and new pollards will be created from retained trees of the right size and shape. The area will form a link between the open main Common and the denser woodland behind.
11. The annual clearance of leaves and other debris from the internal roads was carried out to ensure they are safe for walking on.
12. The events programme for 2021 has been completed and the booklets printed for distribution. The first few spring events are self-guided ones for families and there are no Ranger led events planned until later in the year.
13. Several staff training events have been held with a first aid refresher for most of the ranger team as well as training on the new car parking machines/system. In addition, several webinars were attended on the themes of grazing, re-wilding and other ecological topics.

### **The Commons Car park infrastructure project**

14. All the infrastructure needed for the ANPR and payment machines has been installed at Burnham Beeches Riddlesdown and Farthing Downs. The latter two sites 'go live' on January 25<sup>th</sup> 2021.
15. Work to install new signage at Riddlesdown and Farthing Downs will be completed by the go live date.
16. FAQs have been produced and distributed within the Coulsdon Commons team and public communications are being prepared by the local teams ahead of the launch date.

### **PARTNERSHIPS**

#### **Kenley Revival update**

17. PAYE Stonework and Restoration Ltd, the project's conservation contractor, has been instructed to develop design details and specifications to rectify the defects affecting the 2017 conservation work. Co-ordinating input from Purcell architects and structural engineers Mason Navarro Pledge, PAYE will provide a cost to rectify the brick and mortar damaged by thaumasite sulphate attack, plus structural issues affecting the recreated central spine wall in Blast Pen KC12. To facilitate this work Historic England have agreed to the use of a sulphate resistant cement called Aarlborg, together with additional waterproofing and drainage. Once a cost for rectification is known, commercial discussions can proceed to establish how the required work can be funded and programmed.
18. The project was due to end on 31 December. A formal request to extend the project was submitted to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF, formerly HLF) on 18 December. NLHF have already indicated that they will look favourably on this request because they are still keen for the Kenley Revival Project to contribute to the wider understanding of impermanent architecture conservation. Consequently, they would like rectified work to endure a winter to test its resilience. It is therefore likely that the project will be extended into the first quarter of 2022.

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

19. With the introduction of Tier 4 restrictions for London and Surrey, volunteer activities have been suspended until further notice.
20. Staff members have been working remotely where possible and continuing to practice safe working particularly around the office and works yard.
21. Visitor numbers have phenomenally high across the entire holiday period, far higher than usual. Car parks have been full by mid-morning and the trampling pressure on paths is causing issues with mud and access. Ditches Lane on Farthing Downs has been busy with parked cars on the verges and Hayes Lane bordering Kenley Common is regularly filled with cars each day.
22. The fence line along the A22/Godstone Road boundary of Famet, Riddlesdown has now been completely replaced. The new roadside fence is now slightly taller and sturdier to continue to hold cattle and pedestrian gates have been replaced.
23. 11 of Jacob sheep have put to a tup loaned to us by Capel Manor College. The lambs will be due in Spring and will help replenish some of the older Jacob sheep we have on the Commons.

24. The Sussex cattle have been moved to the barn at the Merlewood Estate Yard for winter. The first calf was born on the 5 January with Rangers carrying out checks throughout the night in addition to checks during the working day. Last year's calves have also been brought into the barn with the bull.
25. Virtual grazing technology using the 'No Fence' collars on the Sussex cattle has continued. New cattle have been trained using the collars alongside the cows that had learned the technology from 2019. The cows that had used them previously integrated quickly to the system.
26. Work to reinforce the roadside edges and curbs on Stites Hill Road through Coulsdon Common has been completed. The earth banks that had previously eroded from heavy rain and flooding have been reinforced with additional material. In some sections, the earth banks have been replaced with wooden bollards where storm water accumulates to allow water runoff.
27. The Rangers have carried out medium and high-risk tree checks across all sites. Remedial work to clear dangerous trees has been done by the Ranger team and contractors.
28. Rangers have been clearing scrub along the edge of Chaldon Way on New Hill to better protect and manage the urban boundary. This continues the work to clear the area of diseased ash trees where there was a risk to property. The clearing will create a new path around the perimeter/urban boundary and hopefully reduce the number of domestic fly tipping from residential gardens.
29. Three new pond scrapes have been created in Plantation Woods on Kenley Common. Tractors were used to create the shallow ponds to benefit bird, amphibians and reptiles on the Common and support existing ponds on neighbouring land.
30. The West Wickham Commons 2021 – 2031 Management Plan consultation has been completed. 141 people completed the online consultation through Survey Monkey. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed to the proposed management options and commented positively on aspects of the new plan, current management and the Rangers.
31. A late survey for fungi was carried out on Farthing Downs in mid-November. The survey highlighted a good level of fungal diversity in the chalk grassland and downland with several species of less common waxcaps and milk-caps.
32. After a callout to local ornithologists, two new bird surveyors for Kenley Common and Coulsdon Common will begin monitoring birds during the breeding season.

33. The research project being led by a student from Hadlow college examining grazing patterns of cattle using GPS collar technology has finished. A small herd of the Sussex cattle were trialling this on Riddlesdown.

### **Ashtead Common**

34. Visitor numbers are still higher than usual, but most people are now restricted to surfaced paths and rides due to poor ground conditions elsewhere.
35. Volunteers returned briefly in December before Tier 4 restrictions were imposed.
36. All staff are now generally working from the office unless engaged in tasks suitable for home working.
37. Most conservation management activity on Ashtead Common is undertaken by contractors and has been relatively unaffected by Covid-19. Consequently, scrub management and veteran tree management work has progressed as planned.

### **Support Services Team (SST)**

38. The SST continue to work a combined rota in the office and at home to maximise social distancing and minimise general Covid-19 related risks. This will now be reviewed with the imposition of Tier 5 restrictions.

### **Incidents**

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

39. There were 27 incidents in the period 20 October to 4 January. These included 6 instances of small scale fly tipping / 4 incidents of site misuse (2 incidents of quads being driven off road/ 1 each of camping and fireworks). Nine incidents related to dogs with two formal written warnings issued for PSPO/Byelaw breaches. One serious instance of a dog not being under effective control, resulted in a jogger. Unfortunately, the dog's owner in this incident has not been identified. The incident occurred in the area of the Beeches where dogs are allowed to be off lead.
40. A fixed penalty notice issued in September for repeatedly failing to keep a dog on a lead under the PSPO was paid in December.

### **Ashtead Common**

41. A small group of campers with a fire was moved from site on 21 November.
42. Evidence of metal detecting (not on the Scheduled Monuments) was recorded on 14 December.
43. Evidence of quad bikes being used on the common was recorded on 28 December.

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

44. There were 15 incidents covering the period of 4 November to 4 January. Six were related to vehicles including quad bikes and scramblers being driven on Coulsdon Common and cars driving on a bridleway adjacent to Stites Hill Road. One incident included a staff members car tyre being slashed outside their property/staff yard.
45. One gathering launching fireworks from the cattle grids on Farthing Downs were moved on.
46. A neighbour bordering onto the estate yard/Coulsdon Common was seen firing an air gun onto the common from their property. The matter was reported to Surrey Police.
47. Several tyres were dumped in the car park area on Fox Lane by Coulsdon Common and by the side of Stites Hill Road.
48. Two incidents related to livestock included a dog chasing cattle on the Grove, Coulsdon Common and a cow that required rescuing after getting stuck in the ditches on Farthing Downs. The cow was removed with assistance from the local fire service and vet. The cow has since recovered, and its unborn calf appears to be unaffected.
49. Other incidents included flooding after heavy rainfall at the road dip on Stites Hill Road on Coulsdon Common and evidence of a fire on West Wickham Common.

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

#### **Burnham Beeches**

50. A small number of licences have been issued for small-scale COVID safe activities including a Nordic walking group and some school groups. Procedures

were updated to ensure that they are also COVID secure. These licenses ceased when the Beeches move to Tier 4.

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