

<b>Committee(s):</b>	<b>Date(s):</b>
Epping Forest and Commons Committee	10 <sup>th</sup> March 2014
<b>Subject:</b> Epping Forest Operations Programme for 2014-2015	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Superintendent of Epping Forest	<b>For Decision</b>

### Summary

This report outlines the visitor access, risk management and conservation projects proposed in the Forest for the year 2014-15.

Increased visitor access work is proposed at St Johns and Woodford Green with detailed proposals given in Appendix One. We will also be working with the Wanstead Park Steering Group to increase our management activity within this important parkland. We hope also to extend volunteer activity at Wanstead Park and Swaines Green to help us meet increased work needs in these areas.

Significant work is to be carried out on the dam at Highams Park Lake during 2014 which the Operations team will be supporting. A new area of risk management activity to be undertaken this year is the survey of highways vegetation as part of a new Highways vegetation management programme. Tree safety will continue to be a large aspect of the Operations teams work in 2014. The completion of the Forest structures survey by City Surveyors will provide an opportunity to develop the Constraints Management System for the Forest during 2014

Habitat management supported by the Stewardship Grant from Natural England to the value of over £160,000 annually, plus the Single Payment Scheme funding, will continue on the same basis as the previous 6 years with work concentrated in the core areas of Hornbeam and Oak pollards, especially Bury Wood and Walthamstow Forest, and around the heaths. The grassland mowing programme will encompass more work on cutting of the wood-pasture glades and restoration areas. The Keystone Tree programme will target 130 Beech and Oak pollards. Cattle grazing will be extended into new areas, such as Honey Lane Quarters, with the help of the new infrastructure including the invisible fence network.

We will be seeking to improve the value for money we achieve from the contract work we let each year. This will be done by preparing an Estates Maintenance Contract covering a comprehensive package of works and tendering it widely to appropriate contractors

### Recommendation(s)

It is recommended that:

- you approve the annual work programme as summarised in the main report and in **Appendix 1 and 2**

## Main Report

### **Background**

1. This report describes significant visitor access, risk management and conservation projects proposed in the Forest for the programme year 2014-15. An update on the Forest Operations Plan development process has also been described for information.
2. The 2014-15 work programme has been prepared drawing on the following resources:
  - a. Epping Forest Management Plan 2010, approved in 2004, and the additional site-specific conservation management plans for Barn Hoppitt, Lords Bushes & Knighton Woods and Wanstead Flats;
  - b. Conservation strategies included in the *Branching Out* Project Stage II Plan (Nov 2008) – the Grazing Strategy (and subsequent approved Grazing Expansion Plan) and the Keystone Trees Strategy;
  - c. Highams Park Dam improvement project and reports of the City of London's panel engineer;
  - d. Wanstead Park Conservation Statement (2011)
  - e. Consultations with the Epping Forest Centenary Trust (EFCT) and Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers (EFCV).

### **Current Position**

3. The key areas of work in the proposed programme (below) are based on improving visitor access, continuing to enhance the condition of the established surfaced ride network for all users, landscape and visitor improvement works at Wanstead Park, managing amenity areas such as St John's and Woodford greens, managing risks - particularly those related to the Highams park dam and the Forest's other designated reservoirs and its trees.
4. The habitat priorities remain as in previous years: the maintenance of the grassland swards, the management of the veteran trees, particularly the identified Keystone Beeches and Oaks and the Hornbeam pollard coupes, and other habitats that contribute to the Forest's favourable condition. This work is supported by agri-environment payments from the Rural Payments Agency, Natural England, the Tubney Trust and the Heritage Lottery Fund
5. The proposals have been developed in discussion with our key partners, EFCV and EFCT. Both organisations will be delivering important aspects of the habitat conservation programme.

## Proposals

6. **Forest Operations Plan:** During 2014-15 the Head of Operations will revise the Operation planning process as outlined in the 13<sup>th</sup> May 2013 EFCC Report, Epping Forest Operations Programme 2013-14. This will involve the production of a comprehensive itemised work plan for 2015-16. Extensive consultation with key stakeholders will be undertaken to ensure the annual operations programme reflects the full spectrum of activity undertaken in the Forest. Procedures within the planned revised process are being piloted as part of ongoing activity so hopefully changes will be seen to be.
7. **Estates Maintenance Contract (EMC):** During 2014 we will seek to reduce the direct and indirect costs of external contracts for a range of works undertaken in the Forest. This will be done by preparing an EMC covering a comprehensive package of works and tendering it widely to appropriate contractors. It is hoped the letting of a larger contract will increase the attractiveness of the work to potential contractors. The letting and management of a single contract, rather than managing multiple contracts, will reduce staff and administration time to run the works involved. In this first year the EMC will focus on bringing previously contracted out works together and piloting contract work in some new activity areas for contractors at Epping Forest. For example, we will contract out at least one Wood Pasture creation area during 2014-15.
8. **Habitat Conservation Programme 2014 -2015:**

The key activities of the habitat conservation programme are described below with the location of much of these works shown on the Maps making up Appendix 2:

  - **Keystone Trees:** As a result of adverse weather conditions and also concerns over tree vitality at different times in the last 2 years, the HLF has accepted that an additional season of work will be required. In 2014-15, therefore, the work on Keystone Trees will continue over both the summer and winter months into 2015. A target of at least 130 Keystone Trees will be set this year with emphasis placed on catching up on the Oak pollards provided their condition remains as good as it was in 2013. This means we will have completed work on 1000 Keystone Trees and be on target to complete the 1200 tree target in 2015/16. Sites where work will be concentrated in 2014/15 will be in the Loughton Manor area (Compartments 19 and 20) south of the Clay Ride and Baldwins Hill.
  - **Wood-pasture Restoration:** We will continue restoring the pollarding cycle to the dense areas of Hornbeam pollards in **Bury Wood**. Areas where opening up around the old trees has begun in 2013 will be revisited to complete the pollarding work, particularly focusing on the Three Planks Ride and the previously pollarded Hornbeams of Cuckoo Pits. In **Walthamstow Forest**, work will continue around the central glades that have been created over the last 25 years. More emphasis will be placed on creating new pollards here where the conservation volunteers (EFCV) have already thinned the young trees.

- Hornbeam pollarding will also be carried out in Honey Lane Quarters, below Big View and continued at Pole Hill, Chingford. Other areas of new pollard creation will be around Debden Slade.
  - Elsewhere in the Forest, in the more Oak and Beech-dominated wood-pasture areas, we will continue to undertake ‘haloing’ of veteran pollards (the thinning out of competing trees around them). Haloing work is particularly important in **Bury Wood** in areas like Long Hills where many Oak pollards still survive but are declining in condition due to shading, as is their associated saproxylic fauna. These Oak pollards have now all been mapped and registered on the Forest Veteran Tree Register and volunteer tree wardens have been helping to assess condition of the trees.
  - **Grassland work:** the grassland work will continue across the Forest as in recent years using a similar programme but with some modifications (see below for St Johns & Woodford Greens). The work is supported by the Environmental Stewardship Scheme. The new arrangements with a contractor for green waste disposal will be continued as they proved effective and saved considerable time last summer.
  - **Grazing:** The areas covered by cattle grazing will be extended as a result of the cattle grid and fence infrastructure supported by the new invisible fence network. This will allow grazing across Honey Lane Quarters, Rushey Plain and Warren Wood Slope this year in addition to the main sites of Chingford Plain, Fairmead and Deershelter Plain.
9. **Wood-pasture Maintenance:** There are a number of areas in the Forest that have been opened up as part of the wood-pasture programme and have proved difficult to maintain. We will be revisiting many of these during 2014/15 to address difficulties such as frequent obstructions and poor access so that they can be more easily maintained in future years
  10. **Fernhills Livestock Fencing: Work** started in 2013/14 to repair or replace the livestock fences around Fernhills. Operations teams will continue to clear this fence line prior to it being made more fully stock proof. The fence improvement works will be undertaken as part the 2014 Scouts construction project.
  11. **Visitor Access Management Programme:** A developing project during 2014 will see the Maintenance team clearing paths in Swaines Green and the Volunteer Officer working with local community groups to encourage their involvement in the longer term care of this area. Specific Visitor Access works proposed to take place in the Forest during the year will be:
    - St Johns and Woodford Greens: Revised detailed management proposals for these two areas are given in Appendix One. The main development is the proposed expansion of the area of amenity grassland and increased frequency of path cuts. It is anticipated that much of this work will be contracted out;

- Wanstead Park: In liaison with the Wanstead Park Steering Group a programme of improvement works is to be undertaken. Vegetation management to restore historic views and to improve access will be the main activities. Key entrances will be reviewed to improve their welcoming aspect, eg through vegetation management and more sensitive use of signs. We will be working with local groups to increase the amount of practical volunteer support within Wanstead Park
  - Ride improvements will concentrate on the network within the Central Keeper area and will include vegetation management and reposting of the rides. This will mean that the rides for the South and Central keeper areas will have been completely reposted and cleared of encroaching vegetation over the period 2013-15. A ride maintenance survey programme is to be initiated during 2014 which will help to improve planned maintenance and to identify additional routes requiring surfacing. Routine maintenance of path edge vegetation and drainage will be continued across the whole network.
12. **Risk Management Activity:** A major area of Risk Management activity for this year will be the works to ensure Highams Park Dam can withstand very extreme flood events in accordance with the requirements of the Reservoirs Act 1975. Operations Teams will be undertaking aspects of these works alongside the contractors. The continued maintenance of the dams within the Forest is an expanding activity each year with, it seems, new works being identified following each inspection by the Panel Engineer.
  13. Trees identified for hazard removal will be a significant proportion of spring and summer programmes for the arboricultural teams. We anticipate increased work towards the South following our Massaria assessments of London Plane Trees. The relative lack of major incidents following the recent storms, we believe, indicates the success of the Tree Safety management work in reducing risks to the City.
  14. A new area of vegetation management for 2014 will be the initiation of a Highways vegetation survey. We presently have a reactive approach to managing these areas, waiting for requests from highways to come in before we work sites. By anticipating works at an earlier stage our aim is to undertake these at a more cost effective stage. In addition, we will be preparing mini-management plans for major road junctions that we have responsibility for the adjacent vegetation. Our aim will be to better plan for the safe and cost effective management of these areas at the same time as realising any wider conservation and amenity benefits. These will be brought to the EFCC Local Meeting for consultation.
  15. Wanstead Flats: As part of continuing works to discourage rough sleeping we will be extending the area of cleared holly on Wanstead Flats. Operations and Keeper staff will be compiling a plan of the areas of most concern and these will be cleared once the nesting season is over. Previously cleared areas will have at least a single cut with tractor flail to keep them open.

16. During 2014 City Surveyors undertook a survey of structures across the Forest and Buffer lands. Once the results are available the Head of Operations, in discussion with CS Principal Engineers, will review the implications for developing the Constraints Management System for Epping Forest. The outcome of this will be brought to the EFCC Local Meeting for consultation.
17. **Other Forest Operations Activity:** In 2014 we successfully sold our woodchip to power stations and thereby reduced the costs of its disposal. We had hoped to sell the cordwood produced in the Forest for firewood but it was a frustrating year with long-term machinery breakdowns preventing timber extraction and with the wet weather adding a further delay. 2014-15 will see the extraction of timber and its sale by competitive tender being given priority once ground conditions permit. A timber sales point has been established at Black Barn to facilitate its marketing

## **Implications**

### **Financial Implications**

18. The work outlined in the proposed work programme is covered by the local risk budget of Epping Forest Division supplemented by the Single Payment Scheme (SPS) and the Environmental Stewardship Scheme grant awarded by Natural England. Grant income from these schemes in 2014 - 2015 will be more than £280,000 for habitat work, including a Stewardship grant element for Forest habitats of over £160,000.
19. The habitat conservation work attracts this substantial external grant-aid in a complex package of financial support with the main programmes being:
  - Entry Level Scheme (ELS): Most grassland in the forest and on the Buffer lands is covered by payments under this scheme.
  - Higher Level Scheme (HLS): The cattle grazing, wood-pasture restoration and 'Project Nightingale' scrub management work receive enhanced financial support
  - Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF): Our 'Keystone trees' project is 74% funded by HLF with match funding from the Tubney Charitable Trust. An important benefit of this funding is that it provides three apprentices and a Team Leader, enabling us to deploy an additional arborist team in the Forest.

### **Legal Implications**

20. The habitats work programme is carried out in accordance with the Conservators' powers and duties under the Epping Forest Act 1878. Management of those parts of the Forest designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) is also informed by statutory regimes relating to those designations. In this regard, the programmed work has received the necessary statutory written consent

from Natural England under Section 28E of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

### **Property Implications**

21. Works to the dam at Highams Park lake are being progressed and separately reported through the project gateway procedure, and presently generally on target.

### **Corporate & Strategic Implications**

#### **City Together**

22. The work proposals above meet two of the key themes “A world class City that supports our communities” and “A World Class City which protects, promotes and enhances our environment”

#### **Open Spaces Department Business Plan**

23. 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.

#### **Epping Forest Management Plan**

24. The proposals match a number of the Epping Forest Vision for the 21st Century’s key visions including:
  - Epping Forest’s position as a unique and ancient landscape for people and wildlife will be strengthened;
  - The Forest will retain its natural aspect with the diversity of wildlife habitats enhanced and the features of international importance protected.
  - Epping Forest will be highly valued as part of a larger and fully accessible protected landscape area.
25. Natural England Officers have been consulted about this work programme and issued formal consent under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981..
26. HLF Officers have been consulted at regular review meetings.

### **Conclusions**

27. The work outlined above is drawn from the 2004-10 Epping Forest Management Plan and associated documents developed from that Plan. Most of the work is a continuation of projects, started in previous years. New areas of proposed activity include works at Wanstead Park and undertaking a Highways vegetation survey. We will extend the area under amenity management at St Johns and Woodford Greens. Improvement works along rides will focus on the Central Keeper area in 2014-15.
28. The habitat work which concentrates on opening up around the ancient pollards and pollarding of Hornbeams (wood-pasture restoration), heathland restoration and grazing is supported by Natural England, with a grant of over

£160,000 for Stewardship work last year Additional financial support will be received through the Single Payment Scheme and from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Tubney Charitable Trust.

29. During 2014/15 the Head of Operations will test an Estates Maintenance Contract process as a means of increasing value for money from our contracted out works and to reduce our contract management costs.
  
30. In-house teams will deliver much of the work detailed in the report. However, volunteers, coordinated by the Ecology Team with assistance from the Volunteer Development Officer, will also deliver significant parts of the habitat conservation programme.

### **Appendices**

- **Appendix 1** – St Johns and Woodford Greens 2014 Management Proposals.
- **Appendix 2** – Habitat conservation proposals 2014-15

### **Background Papers:**

The Epping Forest Management Plan 2004-2010

The Barn Hoppit Wood-pasture Restoration Plan 2006-2011

The Lords Bushes and Knighton Woods Integrated Site Plan 2004-2010

The Wanstead Flats Integrated Site Plan 2006-2011

*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. 13<sup>th</sup> February 2013.

Wanstead Park Conservation (2011)

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**Geoff Sinclair, Head of Operations**

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