

Committee(s)	Dated:
Epping Forest and Commons	09032015
Subject: Epping Forest Operations Programme for 2015-2016	Public
Report of: Superintendent of Epping Forest SEF 11/15	For Decision

Summary

This report outlines the conservation, visitor access and risk management projects proposed in the Forest for the year 2015-16.

A dominant theme of the 2015/16 Work Programme will be the need to increase the area of land under wood-pasture restoration from 16.5 ha to approximately 40 ha each year. This increase is to ensure we meet the 10-year grant commitment under Natural England's Higher Level Scheme seeking to enhance this Habitat of Principal Importance.

The programme also seeks to consolidate works initiated in 2013-14, such as those undertaken through the Wanstead Park Steering Group or at Highams Park to continue with the vegetation management works visited by your Committee in November 2014. Volunteers will be instrumental in delivering both the Highams Park works and also activity to improve access at Swaines Green as well as key areas of wood-pasture restoration work elsewhere in the Forest.

Tree safety will continue to be a significant aspect of the Operations Teams work in 2015. The Forest structures survey, completed by the Built Environment team in 2014, will be developed in 2015 to create a comprehensive structures database for Epping Forest. The first major road junction mini management plan for the Forest, Robin Hood Roundabout, was completed in 2014 and works arising from this will be implemented in 2015 with two further plans produced in the year.

The grassland mowing programme will be extended to include additional cutting of wood-pasture restoration areas. Cattle grazing will be extended into new areas, such as Honey Lane Quarters, with the help of the new infrastructure including the nine new loops of the invisible fence network.

In partnership with the City Procurement Service, the programme will continue to improve the value for money we achieve from the contract work through tendering and letting works under the bulk Estates Maintenance Contract. In addition, we will be working with the Epping Forest Centenary Trust (EFCT) to identify external funding to help with the cost of improving the all-ability trail at High Beach.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- approve the annual work programme as summarised in the main report and in **Appendices 1 and 2.**

Main Report

Background

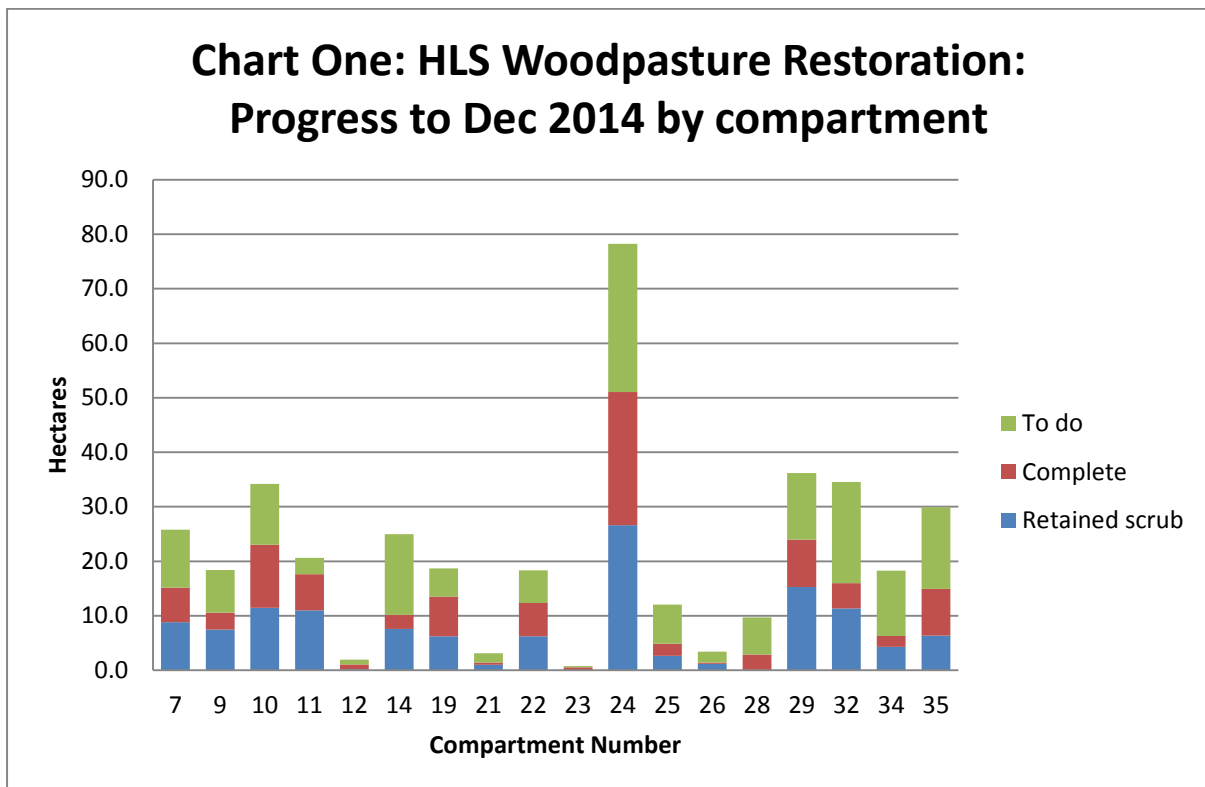
1. This report describes significant conservation, visitor access and risk management projects proposed in the Forest for the programme year 2015-16.
2. The 2015-16 work programme has been prepared drawing on the following resources:
 - Epping Forest Management Plan 2010, approved in 2004, and the additional site-specific conservation management plans for Barn Hoppitt, Lords Bushes & Knighton Woods and Wanstead Flats;
 - 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;
 - Highams Park Dam improvement project and reports of the City of London's Panel Engineer;
 - Wanstead Park Conservation Statement (2011)
 - Consultations with the Epping Forest Centenary Trust (EFCT) and Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers (EFCV).

Current Position

3. We are at the end of the sixth year in a 10-year agreement with Natural England for funding the restoration of 390ha of wood-pasture at Epping Forest. In preparation for the 2015 Work Program a review of the progress of the funded Woodpasture Restoration program was undertaken. The outcome of the review is show graphically in Chart One and was discussed in detail at the December 2014 Local Meeting
4. Overall, the review demonstrated that 58% of the agreed programme target has been met at the end of Year 6. However, 25% of the target was met through works on the ground over the last six years (Red on chart one) and we now have 42% of the programme target (Green on chart one) to deliver through works on the ground in four years. The blue land is areas where under the terms of the agreement we consider no work is required.
5. In summary, the area worked each year will increase from an average of 16.5 ha to around 40ha. The impact of this changed scale of working will be mitigated to

some extent by the scaling down of the HLF Keystone tree programme in 2015. Necessarily, as a key to the favourable condition of the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) this increased work requirement will dominate the annual work calendar.

- The key areas of work in the proposed 2015 programme (below) in addition to the wood-pasture restoration are based on improving visitor access, continuing to enhance the condition of the established surfaced ride network for all users, continuing the landscape and visitor improvement works at Wanstead and Highams Park and managing risks - particularly those related to highways woody verge vegetation and tree safety.



- The habitat priorities have been modified slightly from previous years with increased activity to maintain previously cleared wood-pasture areas and reduced Keystone Tree activity. As in previous years we will continue with the maintenance of the grassland swards and other habitats that contribute to the Forest's favourable condition.
- Both the grasslands and wood-pasture operations are supported by agri-environment payments from the Rural Payments Agency and Natural England.

Proposals

- Estates Maintenance Contract (EMC):** As in 2014, in partnership with the City Procurement Service (CPS) it is intended to let much of the contract works in 2015 as part of two bulk contracts tendered to a range of providers.

10. **Habitat Conservation Programme 2015 -2016:** The key activities of the habitat conservation programme are described below:

- **Keystone Trees:** The HLF-supported Keystone Tree programme under the *Branching Out* project ended in 2014. We have ongoing maintenance to the 1,046 Keystone trees completed during this 5-year project and a commitment to HLF under the 20-year Legacy to reach a total of 1,200 managed Keystone Trees. In 2015/16 we will achieve this through tackling Keystone Trees which are within existing wood-pasture restoration areas and also those identified for work due to other reasons, such as tree safety.
- **Wood-pasture Restoration:** To ensure we meet our HLS commitments we will be continuing with the annual wood-pasture restoration programme but at an enhanced level for the next four years. In 2015-16 we are planning to work 45.28 ha across 14 locations in the usual Forest compartments for this conservation work. **Appendix One** gives an itemised breakdown of the location and the work required along with a map. An example of a work specific map for one compartment is given in **Appendix Two**.
- In some compartments larger areas will be worked in one block than has previously been the case. The following locations have working areas in excess of 4ha:
 - Wake Valley (4.23 ha – across 6 working blocks)
 - Lords Bushes (4.69 ha- across 5 working blocks)
 - Bury Wood (5.44 ha – across 4 working blocks)
 - Pillow Mounds and Comical Corner (6.09 ha – across 7 working blocks)
 - Honey Lane Quarters (6.52 ha –across 5 working blocks)
- In these locations with larger worked areas we will undertake a public information exercise to inform people in advance of the works. This will include advance on-site signage as well as the use of social media.
- Wood-pasture restoration work is scheduled to commence from mid-July, following the tree safety work, and will continue through to February 2016, It is anticipated that it will occupy the Arborist teams for much of that time. We also propose to engage woodland contractors to help with implementing some of this programme for the first time.
- **Grassland work:** The grassland work will continue across the Forest as in recent years using a similar programme. As with 2014, this will be implemented by combined in-house and contractor teams. The grassland work is supported by the Environmental Stewardship Scheme funded by Natural England.
- **Almshouse Plain:** We are presently working on plans to improve the drainage along paths at Almshouse Plain while at the same time directing more of the water onto the grassland areas to ensure the conservation of the damp grassland flora.

- In a small way this is a first attempt at managing the water catchment to moderate water flows. This could ultimately be part of the solution to managing the flooded areas around Connaught Water and such work will be aimed at providing concomitant positive wildlife benefits to enhance the SSSI and its favourable condition. When complete the proposals will be reported to your Committee and consent will be sought from Natural England prior to any implementation to change drainage on the grassland areas, though some minor works to the path drainage may well be implemented sooner in 2015.
- **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 extensive 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.
- **Ponds/Lakes:** Volunteers and staff have been working for a number of years to control 'Floating Pennywort' (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*) an invasive aquatic plant at the Perch Pond in Wanstead Park. Despite their efforts in 2014 it has spread to other parts of Perch Pond and we need to implement more robust and extensive control measures. A concern is that, uncontrolled, it could spread to the Ornamental Waters which is lower down in the Wanstead Park cascade. During 2015/16 we will implement a contractor-led control programme of Floating Pennywort in Perch Pond
- A second invasive aquatic species, Australian Swamp Stonecrop (*Crassula Helmsii*) has been established across 19 of Epping Forest's water bodies for some years and was the subject of a detailed survey in 2012 by the Ecology Team. This is not an easy plant to control and there has been no effective large-scale control in the UK to date, short of pond infilling. A concern is that it is abundant in Alexandra Lake on Wanstead Flats with a risk of the plant being spread to the nearby Jubilee Pond, where we have recently invested substantial sums to improve its water retention and natural aspect. During 2015 we will review the management of *Crassula* on Wanstead Flats with the aim of identifying a strategy to restrict it from spreading to other water bodies in the area.
- Following the end of the Jubilee Pond Project a number of legacy actions have been identified to improve the aesthetics of the surrounding fencing, improve both terrestrial and aquatic vegetation and to promote greater community involvement in the care of the area. A separate plan detailing proposals will be presented to the Local meeting

11. **Wood-pasture Maintenance:** Following work to restore areas to wood-pasture annual maintenance is required to control tree stump and seedling growth and coarse vegetation, such as brambles. Such work is necessary under the HLS scheme requirements and is undertaken on a 1-2 year rotation depending on the vigour of the local vegetation. In 2015 we have around 100 hectares that is to be cut with tractor mounted flails. This work will be undertaken with a mix of in-house and contract staff.

12. Fernhills Livestock Fencing: Work started in 2013/14 to repair or replace the livestock fences around Fernhills. We had hoped to undertake the fencing as part of the Scout project but the focus of this project was changed. The fence improvement works will now be undertaken by contractors during 2015 to allow grazing to re-commence at this site, which attracts annual Higher Level Stewardship funding for the grazing of its flora.

13. Visitor Access Management Programme: In addition to at least an annual cut of official bridleways the following specific visitor access works are proposed to take place in the Forest during the year:

- Swaines Green: Staff and, in particular, volunteers from the Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers have done considerable work in 2014 to open up the access around Swaines Green. Staff will maintain this restored open ground in 2015 and the EFCV will continue their program of opening up the access and the meadows.
- Wanstead Park: The program of vegetation management works implemented in 2014 to open up paths in the park will be continued. The work will be focussed on the peripheral path around Ornamental waters to widen the path and to remove lake side woody vegetation. This work will tend to be focussed in the months when Arborist teams are not engaged with woodpasture restoration work, ie work taking place as required in the period March-August each year.
- Highams Park: Work started in 2014 to remove holly and scrub to open views onto the lake and improve access and to reduce competition around Keystone Trees will be continued. The 2014 works were implemented by Arborist teams as part of works linked to the lake desilting and dam improvements. In 2015 much of the work will however be delivered through a volunteer program organised by both EFCT and the Central Keeper team.
- Path improvements: Improvements to the all-ability trail at High Beach undertaken in 2014 by the Epping Forest Centenary Trust's supported 'Scout Project' will be extended to complete the improvements to the path surface. It is proposed that we work through the EFCT to identify and seek external funding to cover the cost of contractors to undertake this work. Also during 2015 we will surface a short section of path from the Gilwell Scouts' facility to Yates meadow.
- Ride improvements: Routine maintenance of path edge vegetation and drainage will be continued across the whole network. Re-posting of the bridleways across the central area will be completed in 2015.

14. Risk Management Activity: As well as undertaking significant highways vegetation management works during 2014 we were fortunate that Essex Highways undertook extensive works on the A-road verges. Much of this work anticipated works we had planned for 2014 work program. During 2015 we will

implement works identified in the Robin Hood Junction Mini-management plan and will complete plans for two further junctions at Wake Arms Roundabout and the Waterworks Roundabout. Ongoing maintenance of highways edge vegetation will largely be contracted out through the Estate Maintenance Contract with in house works focussed on the more herbaceous verges or where technical arboricultural intervention is required.

15. A potentially disruptive and visible Highways vegetation management project to be undertaken in 2015 will be at James Lane near Leyton Flats. Tree safety works require us to close the road and we will use the opportunity of the road closure to restructure the road verge vegetation to make it simpler and safer to manage. This will result in an outcome similar to what was undertaken at the 'Cross roads' by the Robin Hood Roundabout in 2013.
16. Trees identified for hazard removal will be a significant proportion of spring and summer programmes for the Arborist Teams. In a change from recent years the Tree Safety assessments in 2015 will be undertaken by two different surveyors. Surveyors will be rotated around the four Tree safety zones so as to ensure that each year we have a fresh pair of eyes surveying each zone.
17. Wanstead Flats: As part of continuing works to discourage rough sleeping we will have at least a single cut with tractor flail of previously cleared scrub areas to deter rough sleepers by keeping these areas open.
18. During 2014 the Built Environment team undertook a survey of structures across the Forest and Buffer lands. This has been reviewed by the Epping Forest Keeper team and a number of additions made. During 2015 we will be drawing this work together to establish a single Geographic Information Service (GIS) database (digital maps) of structures across Epping Forest along with a plan on their safe management. As reported in the 2014 Work Programme report to the EFCC the outcome of this work will be taken to your Committee for consideration.

Implications

19. **Financial** - The work outlined in the proposed work programme is to be covered by the local risk budget of Epping Forest Division supplemented by the Single Payment Scheme (SPS), its successor the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and the Environmental Stewardship Scheme grant awarded by Natural England covering both Entry Level (ELS) and Higher Level (HLS) work. Grant income from these schemes in 2015 - 2016 will be £245,000 approximately (uncertainty regarding the new BPS scheme rates and the Euro-Pound exchange rate mean an exact figure is not possible at this stage). This total includes a Stewardship grant element for Forest habitats of over £160,000.
20. **Legal** - 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 (as amended).

21. **Property** - The continued development of the Epping Forest structures database will require support from the Built Environment team

Corporate & Strategic Implications

22. **City Together Strategy** - 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”

23. **Open Spaces Department Business Plan** - 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.

24. **Epping Forest Management Plan** - 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..

Conclusions

26. 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 along with continued expansion in risk management works.

27. The habitat work concentrates on ensuring we meet our 10-year commitments under the HLS. The work required to achieve this is nearly triple previous year’s activity rates and represents a considerable proportion of the Arborist teams’ activity in 2015/16. Woodpasture and grazing is supported by Natural England, with a grant of over £160,000 for Stewardship work last year

28. Volunteers will be instrumental in delivering a large proportion of the work on a number of key projects in 2015/16. In particular we will be reliant on their efforts to deliver the works at Swaines Green and Highams Park Lake along with a significant amount work on wood-pasture restoration. In addition we will work with the EFCT to identify and apply for external funding to undertake the work to improve the all ability trail at High Beach.

29. In-house teams will deliver much of the work detailed in the report. Contractor support will be expanded to help with the delivery of the increased Woodpasture Program and to continue with their support on implementing the grass cutting and highway vegetation management works.

Appendices

- **Appendix 1** – 2015 Detailed Wood-pasture Programme
- **Appendix 2** – Wood-pasture Programme map for 2015 in Compartment 24

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. 13th February 2013.

Wanstead Park Conservation (2011)

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