

<b>Committee(s):</b>	<b>Date(s):</b>
Epping Forest & Commons Committee	9 July 2012
<b>Subject:</b> Urban Development & Burnham Beeches SAC	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Superintendent of Burnham Beeches	<b>For Information</b>

### Summary

Burnham Beeches is designated as a site of European Importance under the Habitats Regulations, which confers an extra degree of protection from development both on the site and in the neighbouring area. Increased urbanisation of the land surrounding the Beeches is of concern because it is considered to be having an adverse impact on its habitats and wildlife. An independent report was recently commissioned from Footprint Ecology to evaluate this issue in more detail.

The report compares Burnham Beeches with other sites of European Importance where restrictions in planning development have already been put in place or are underway. The report concludes that, due to the high number of visitors originating from the residential areas close to the Beeches, the local planning authority should devise and implement suitable measures to mitigate the adverse impacts of local development via their forthcoming Development Management Development Plan Document (DPD).

The report suggests ways to achieve the above.

#### **Recommendations**

- to receive this report and the attached document.
- that City of London Officers continue to work closely with Natural England and consultants to influence the DPD to protect Burnham Beeches from harmful developments.
- that the remaining recommendations of the Footprint report are considered more fully within the duration of the current Management Plan and funding sought from appropriate places when the costs have been fully assessed.

## Main Report

### **Background**

1. Burnham Beeches was designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under the provisions of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 (the Habitats Regulations). The European interest feature is ‘Atlantic acidophilous beech forests with *Ilex* (holly) and sometimes also *Taxus* (yew) in the shrub layer’ which in Burnham Beeches is acknowledged to contain veteran beech and oak trees providing epiphytic communities which in turn support a diverse saproxylic invertebrate assemblage.
2. The Burnham Beeches SAC includes almost all the land under City of London ownership together with an approximately equal area belonging to the Portman – Burtley Estate, the National Trust and a private house holder. The area in City of London ownership contains biologically the most important part of the SAC, the old pollarded trees, and is also that part which is open access for members of the public.
3. The European designation recognises that Burnham Beeches is one of the most outstanding areas of acid beech wood pasture in the UK. It also confers added protection within the planning system, requiring a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) of any ‘projects’ that are ‘likely to have a significant effect on a European site’.
4. In the light of this assessment a project can only go ahead after it has been ‘ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the European site.’ This includes individual planning applications for development on, adjacent to or in the vicinity of the Burnham Beeches SAC and also long term planning documents produced by the local District Council.
5. Further, under the SAC legislation the impact of any development is not considered in isolation but ‘in combination with other plans or projects’. This includes the combined impact of many different projects and also the contribution of a new project to current background levels (for example of air quality)

### **Current position**

6. One area of concern continues to be the increasing urbanisation of land around Burnham Beeches through the building of additional houses. Most of these are small scale developments that infill small patches of land and build on existing gardens. This piecemeal approach reduces the quantity and quality of buffer land for wildlife close to the Beeches and increases

the number of local residents who then have an impact on the Nature Reserve in a variety of ways.

7. City of London officers have worked closely with South Bucks District Council (SBDC) to develop their Core Strategy Development Plan Document (adopted 2011). This document outlines the decision process by which land in the District will be developed until 2026 and was itself subject to a HRA prior to adoption.
8. Core Policy 9 of the Core Strategy states that,  
*'The conservation and enhancement of Burnham Beeches SAC, and its surrounding supporting biodiversity resources, will be achieved through restricting the amount of development in close proximity of the site, and ensuring that development causes no adverse effect on the integrity of the SAC. Further details on mechanisms for achieving this will be given in the Development Management DPD.'*
9. SBDC are now starting to work on the Development management DPD (development planning document) which will translate the broad wording of Core Policy 9 into specific actions. This presents the City's officers with a further opportunity to achieve the long term protection of the Beeches.
10. Meanwhile, measures to control development have been successfully implemented at other UK sites of European importance with much of the background research for the organisations concerned being provided by Footprint Ecology. For this reason Footprint Ecology were commissioned to review the situation at Burnham Beeches and to compare this with other European sites
11. The recent visitor count estimated that approximately 585,000 visits are made to Burnham Beeches per year. This represents an increase of around 14,000 visitors between this and the last survey in 2002/3. In addition, approximately 215,000 dogs now visit the site each year which is a 67% increase on the 2002 figure. Previous consultation events have established that many visitors come frequently, some 38% for example coming at least twice a week and that some 66% live within 5 miles, thus most visits are made by local people.
12. Recent site management has sought to mitigate the impact of visitors on the features of European importance as far as possible. This has been achieved by improving facilities in a core and more robust area while removing some in more sensitive areas. Thus, most outlying car parks have been removed, most internal roads are closed to traffic and the toilets and café are located close to the major car parking area.

**Report findings** (see appendix for the full report)

13. The impacts of urban development on Burnham Beeches are many and varied. Some are ‘off-site’ such as hydrological and air quality issues but many are associated with high visitor numbers and increasing population density in the neighbouring area.
14. A consequence of more people visiting the site is increased trampling leading to soil compaction and detrimental impacts on the health of trees. More dogs being walked on the site results in increased nutrient levels which harm the nutrient poor habitat and causes greater disturbance to wildlife.
15. Urbanisation is also linked to increases in alien species, an increased risk of diseases and pests and larger amounts of litter and vandalism. It should be noted that the long term combination of several of these impacts acts to increase stress levels on the habitats; the combination of these can be more harming than individual aspects alone.
16. The Footprint report compares figures that can be used as indices of visitor pressure and the impact of urban development across a range of European sites for which there are data. Burnham Beeches is represented in these tables twice, once being the full area/perimeter of the SAC (i.e. including areas not in the ownership of the City of London) and the second time being the City of London area alone.
17. In terms of numbers of local houses per hectare of SAC and numbers of visitors per hectare the Beeches is very high, and certainly receiving a level of visitor pressure that is comparable with other European sites where planning mitigation schemes are in place (See Tables 3, 4 and 5, sections 6.15 to 6.19, pages 40-42).
18. The report presents the urgent need for a strategic mitigation scheme. It concludes that, since around 2/3rds of the visitors come from the South Bucks District Council area, City of London staff, together with Natural England should work with SBDC to set within policy a mitigation strategy to restrict urbanisation and housing intensification in the vicinity of the SAC. It may also be necessary to involve neighbouring local authorities (section 7, page 44).
19. The final part of the report presents a list of potential components of a mitigation strategy, including suggestions for site management as well as policy based options. The report authors have indicated that the additional options for mitigation through site management are very limited because all their ‘usual’ suggestions have already been put in place. Some of the list of

further investigations are relatively easy to achieve or are already in place, others may require significant resources (see section 8, page 49).

### **Implications of the report**

20. The report has been circulated to SBDC planning officers as well as Natural England and planning specialists. A meeting of all parties was held at SBDC offices and an agreement reached that the findings of this report should be incorporated into the Development Management DPD (due to be adopted in 2014).

### **Proposals**

21. It is proposed that City of London Officers continue to work closely with Natural England and consultants to influence the DPD to protect Burnham Beeches from harmful developments. Also that the remaining recommendations of the report are considered more fully within the duration of the current Management Plan and funding sought from appropriate places when the cost have been fully assessed

### **Financial and Risk Implications**

22. The cost of the commissioned report was £4,403 and was met from the site local risk budget.

### **Strategic Implications**

23. This project is listed in the management plan under the header of 'Protect protected species and habitats from harm' to be achieved by working with Natural England and using commissioned work where appropriate to achieve this.
24. This project meets the first action under Departmental Objective 2 of the Open Spaces Business plan 'respond to changing Government policy on planning to ensure the interests of the Open Spaces are protected' and also an action under Departmental Objective 4, 'Promote strategies and initiatives for the protection and conservation of green space'.

### **Consultees**

25. The Chamberlain's Department, City Solicitors and Town Clerk's Departments were consulted on this report.

### **Conclusion**

26. The commissioned report has been very effective in bringing together all the issues of concern relating to the impacts of urban development on Burnham Beeches. The negative impacts of increasing development and visitor pressure are of concern. Comparisons of housing density and numbers of visitors per hectare of land between the Beeches and other sites of European importance are especially strong and illustrate that there is a

need for restricting future development through the local planning system. The document has already been used to initiate discussions with the local planning authority and will continue to be a source of guidance throughout the negotiations.

**Background Papers:**

- **Appendix 1 is the full report, entitled ‘Urban Development and Burnham Beeches SAC’**

**Contact:**

*Helen Read*

*x6686*

*[helen.read@cityoflondon.gov.uk](mailto:helen.read@cityoflondon.gov.uk)*