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| Committee(s) | Dated: 7 th March 2016 |
| Epping Forest and Commons | |
| Subject: Epping Forest Operations Programme for 2016-2017 | Public |
| Report of: Superintendent of Epping Forest (SEF 11/16) | For Decision |

Summary

This report outlines the conservation, visitor access and risk management projects proposed in the Forest for the year 2016-17.

The dominant theme of the 2016/17 work programme is the continuing habitat conservation work including the wood pasture restoration programme for which the rate of work has been increased to ensure we meet the 10-year grant commitment under Natural England's Higher Level Scheme.

The key areas of work in the proposed 2016-17 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 Parks and managing risks - particularly those related to highways woody verge vegetation, fly-tipping, rough sleeping and tree safety.

The report also highlights potential works on the poplar and plane avenue in Woodford which presents some challenging issues. The possibility of fundraising for a new path on the east side of Highams Park lake is also outlined.

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 bulk contracts with the potential to extend these for up to three years. In addition, we will be working with The Wren Group to identify external funding to help with the cost of improving the seating area by the Cafe at Wanstead Park.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- approve the annual work programme as summarised in the main report and in the map at Appendix 1

Main Report

Background

1. This report describes significant conservation, visitor access and risk management projects proposed in the Forest for the programme year 2016-17.
2. The 2016-17 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), Higham Park Snedders, Epping Forest Bridleway Association

Current Position

3. We are in the eighth year of a 10-year agreement with Natural England for funding the restoration of 390ha of wood-pasture at Epping Forest. Following a review of progress in 2015 we increased the scale of work from an average of 16.5 ha to around 40ha to ensure we meet commitments by the end of the agreement.
4. 2015/16 was the first year of this revised target and required increased arborist team time spent on wood-pasture restoration and the consideration of different work methods. During the year we trialled a Forestry Mulcher which has proved very helpful on the the holly dominated areas, which are particularly time-consuming to work using our normal methods. This has helped us to progress work at a much quicker pace and will be used more in the next three years..
5. We have been working on consolidating contract works in fewer bulk contracts to increase their commercial attractiveness and to reduce management costs. We have been helped considerably in this process by our City Procurement Service (CPS) team. Following their good contract performance, and in line with CPS guidelines, we have been able to confirm a three-year agreement with Warren Smith Farming Ltd to undertake the contract side of our 61.9 ha grassland management program and with BWS for our roadside hedge and verge management. The haylage contract is to be retendered in 2016
6. The key areas of work in the proposed 2016/17 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, fly-tipping rough sleeping and tree safety.

7. Both the grasslands and wood-pasture operations are supported by agri-environment payments from the Rural Payments Agency and Natural England.

Proposals

8. **Estates Maintenance Contract (EMC):** In partnership with the CPS we let two bulk contracts on a three year basis in 2015. In 2016/17 we hope to let the Haylage works on a three year agreement following a competitive tender process.
9. **Habitat Conservation Programme 2016 -2017:** The key activities of the habitat conservation programme are described below:

- **Keystone Trees:** the *Branching Out* Project's Keystone Tree programme, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), was extended until 2017 to allow for a moratorium on work due to drought conditions in the middle of the project. Of the original target of 1,200 ancient Oak and Beech pollards, 88% (1,063) have been completed. As a result 137 trees remain to be worked on and in 2016/17 we will carry out arboricultural work to a minimum of 70 of these. The majority will be ancient Oak pollards and 82 of these have been surveyed ready for haloing works at Lords Bushes (58) and Highams Park (24). All these Keystone trees will form part of other over-arching operations such as wood pasture restoration, park restoration and tree safety works.
- **Wood-pasture Restoration:** To ensure we meet our HLS commitments we will be continuing with the annual wood-pasture restoration programme at the enhanced level we initiated in 2015/16. In 2016/17 we are planning to work across up to 60ha within 16 of the 38 Forest compartments for this conservation work. Appendix One provides a map of the main locations for the wood-pasture restoration work planned for 2016-17 (highlighted in yellow) and also work already completed or planned.
 - Following the successful trial of a forestry mulcher in 2015/16, with the consent of Natural England, we will be working in with this machine again in appropriate areas such as Walthamstow Forest and Lords Bushes. In blocks dominated by Holly infill the mulcher considerably increases productivity of the arborist teams while leaving the worked area better suited for longer term maintenance.
 - The majority of wood-pasture restoration work is scheduled to commence from mid-July, following the tree safety work, and will continue through to March 2017. It is anticipated that it will occupy the Arborist teams for much of that time.
- **Wood-pasture Maintenance:** Following work to restore areas to wood-pasture annual maintenance is required to control tree stump regrowth,

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 2016 we will have around 60ha to be cut with tractor mounted flails. This work will be undertaken with a mix of in-house and contract staff.

- **Grassland work:** The grassland work will continue across the Forest as in recent years using a similar programme. As with 2015, this will be implemented by combined in-house and contractor teams who are operating under a three year agreement (see Current Position above). The grassland work is supported by the Entry Level Stewardship Scheme funded by Natural England.
 - Scrub removal work undertaken on Fernhills in 2015/16 will be extended and completed in 2016/17. This more involved restoration work is covered by a Higher Level Stewardship Scheme with a higher rate of payment.
- **Trueloves Livestock Fencing:** We propose to enclose Trueloves in a stock fence in 2016/17 so as to allow grazing with livestock of this important grassland site. Permissive access for horse-riders will be maintained through appropriately positioned gates and consideration is being given to a barrier-free section alongside Lippitt's Hill. Any gates would be left open in livestock free periods. This work will be undertaken with in-house staff and we anticipate it being complete in the 2017/18 work season. To provide a water supply for the livestock we will look in the first instance to enlarging small pond on the site. Trueloves attracts annual Higher Level Stewardship funding for the grazing of its flora.
- **Grazing:** The extension of grazing across the Forest planned for 2015/16 was hindered due to difficulties with the invisible fence network. These have been modified and during 2016/17 the areas covered by cattle grazing will be extended. This will allow extensive grazing across Honey Lane Quarters 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. In 2015/16 we started works to aid the control of the Pennywort with the clearance of bankside scrub amongst which this invasive alien species established. In 2016/17 we will engage specialist contractors to mechanically remove the Pennywort after which any recurring outbreaks will be treated with herbicide.
 - Following the relining of Jubilee Pond in 2013 a combination of intensive pressure by geese and the effect of wave action have led to the pond liner becoming exposed through erosion on the margins. This erosion damage is extensive and during 2016/17 a number of actions will be undertaken to attempt to reinforce the pond edge.

- Enhanced protection of existing and new planted pond margin plants to improve the natural protection of the pond margin.
- Reinforcement of the pond margin through constructing a rocky edge.

10. 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:

- **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. We are also working with the WREN group at Wanstead Park too obtain external finance of £12 000 to fund the improvement of the seating area by the Cafe.
- **Highams Park:** The 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. In 2016/17 much of the work will be delivered through a volunteer program organised by both EFCT and a new group the 'Highams Park Snedders'. We will also plan and cost a new surfaced path along the east side of the lake. The intention would be to then apply for appropriate consents, make any required modifications and then seek external funding for this path during 2016-18
- **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. This work formed part of the 2015/16 work programme and is uncompleted from then. Also uncompleted from 2015/16 is the surfacing of short section of path from the Gilwell Scouts' facility to Yates meadow which we plan to complete in 2016/17.
- **Ride improvements:** Routine maintenance of path edge vegetation and drainage will be continued across the whole network. Drainage work will concentrate on sections of path suffering from rill erosion. Liaison with Natural England will be undertaken with maps provided as required where work is within the SSSI. Re-posting of the bridleways across the central area will be completed in 2016.
- **The View overflow carpark:** We will be investigating grass reinforcement options for extending the use of the overflow flow car park opposite The View. If viable we would look to introduce improvements to approximately a third of the grass area in 2016/17.

11. **Risk Management Activity:**. During 2016/17 we will implement works identified in the Wake Arms Roundabout Mini-management plan and will complete a similar plan for the Waterworks Roundabout. Ongoing maintenance of highways edge vegetation will largely be contracted out through a three year agreement with a local provider.
12. 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 2016 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.
13. A potentially difficult tree safety operation will be the reworking of the poplar and plane avenue at Woodford, leading to the Winston Churchill statue. An increasing number of trees are being identified for tree safety works. It is proposed that plans for managing this prominent avenue will be discussed with the London Borough of Redbridge members and officers at one of the regular liaison meetings (next ones are June and December 2016) which we host. Proposals would then be further discussed at the Verderers' Local meeting before being reported to Committee.
14. 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. We will also review our management of rough sleepers in this area during 2016/17 to ensure we are responding effectively and in a way that avoids adverse impacts on biodiversity and amenity considerations.
15. Car park entrances: It is proposed that we improve the security and surfacing at the entrances to car parks that are well used or especially prone to flytipping. Improvements will involve bringing the entrance up to the same standard as some of our more recently improved car parks, such as at Centre road. A 7x7m area will be tarmaced to highway standards and each entrance will be gated with alligator teeth on the exit so that the car park can be easily closed.

Implications

16. **Financial** - The work outlined in the proposed work programme is to be covered by the local risk budget of Epping Forest Division supplemented by grant aid from 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 2016 - 2017 will be over £250,000 (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.
17. **Legal** - The habitats work programme is carried out in accordance with the Conservators' powers and duties under the Epping Forest Act 1878. Formal consent for these works has been sought from Natural England under Section 28

of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981(as amended) for the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and as required under the Habitats Regulations 2010 in relation to the Special Area of Conservation (SAC).The Stewardship-related works form part of an agreement with Natural England for grant payments in support of the restoration of habitats within the SSSI towards Favourable Condition status.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

18. The work and proposals outlined above meet the City of London Corporate Plan's (2015 -2019) key policy priorities of:

- Maximising the opportunities and benefits afforded by our role in supporting London's communities;
- Increasing the outreach and impact of the City's cultural, heritage and leisure contribution to the life of London and the nation

19. **Open Spaces Department Business Plan** - The report also supports the Open Spaces Department's vision to protect our world class green spaces for the benefit of our local communities and the environment.

20. **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.

21. Natural England Officers have been consulted about this work programme and issued formal consent under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 and assent under the Habitat Regulations 2010.

Conclusions

22. The work outlined above is drawn from the 2004-10 Epping Forest Management Plan, associated documents developed from that Plan and SSSI Favourable Condition priorities agreed with Natural England. Most of the work is a continuation of projects started in previous years along with continued expansion in risk management works.

23. The habitat work concentrates on ensuring we can achieve favourable condition of our wood-pasture, grasslands and heaths and that we meet our 10-year commitments under the HLS.

24. Volunteers will be instrumental in delivering a large proportion of the work on a number of key projects in 2016/17. In addition we will be working with volunteers to identify and apply for external funding to undertake works at Wanstead Park

25. In-house teams will deliver much of the work detailed in the report. Contractors will be used to support implementation of the grass cutting and highway vegetation management works.

Appendices

- **Appendix 1** – Map of Wood-pasture Restoration Locations

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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