

<b>Committee(s):</b>	<b>Date(s):</b>
<b>Epping Forest and Commons Committee</b>	<b>20<sup>th</sup> November 2017</b>
<b>Subject: Stoke Common Management Plan, Public Consultation and Grant Application</b>	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of: Superintendent of The Commons</b>	<b>For Decision</b>

### **Summary**

The transfer of Stoke Common from South Bucks District Council to the City of London Corporation was completed on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2007. At that time the Superintendent consulted a wide audience to guide the development of a 10 year management plan for the site. That plan was approved by this committee in July 2008.

A new 10 year Management Plan is now required for Stoke Common commencing 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019 to guide the City Corporation's work on the site. Once again, this will involve consultation with a wide range of stakeholders which must be undertaken prior to a final draft management plan being submitted to your Committee in November 2018.

Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship Scheme has until now, provided the majority of the funding for the restoration work of the heathland. This source of grant funding expires on 31st October 2018.

A fresh grant application is required under Natural England's new Countryside Stewardship Scheme. If successful, this grant will ensure the continuation of heathland restoration work on the site, commencing 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019. It is possible that the new grant will contribute less than its predecessor to the work on Stoke Common.

The management plan, associated public consultation exercise and grant application must run hand in hand during 2018 and each will inform the other. Members must decide how they wish to be consulted during the development of the management plan. **Members are asked to:**

- i. Approve the necessary actions outlined in the provisional timetable for the management plan, grant application and public consultation process – **Table 2**.
- ii. Agree that drafts of the management plan are brought to this Committee for comment and final approval according to that same timetable.

## Main Report

### Background

1. The transfer of Stoke Common, an ancient heathland and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), from South Bucks District Council (SBDC) to the City of London Corporation was completed on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2007.
2. Since that date The City's team based at Burnham Beeches have actively managed the restoration of the site to heathland.
3. Natural England recently assessed the condition of the SSSI as being in 'improving condition' having last recorded it as being in 'unfavourable, declining condition'. Natural England further commented that the City Corporation has achieved very substantial improvements in restoring the valuable heathland habitats since the site came into its ownership.
4. Community engagement has been key to this success. Local communities and various conservation experts were consulted during the development of the original site management plan. A Friends of Stoke Common Group was also formed at that time to help deliver the ambitious work programme. This group continues to flourish and support the City's work.

### Current Position

#### 5. Management Plan

- i. The City's original Stoke Common management plan ran for a 10 year period commencing 2008. It expires on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2018. A new management plan is required.

#### 6. Natural England Grant

- i. The previous management plan also helped to deliver and reflect a successful grant application under Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. That grant covered the majority of costs associated with the heathland restoration works which stand at £53K per annum in total.

**Table 1.**

<b>Expenditure</b>	
Employees	£19,000
Grounds Maintenance	£27,000
Supplies and Services	£6,000
Third Party Payments	£1,000
<u>Total Expenditure</u>	<u>£53,000</u>
<u>Income (From HLS Grant)</u>	<u>£31,000</u>
<b><u>Total cost to local risk</u></b>	<b><u>£22,000/annum</u></b>

- ii. The grant funding of £31,000/annum ends on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2018. Another grant application must be made under Natural England's new Countryside Stewardship Scheme.
  - iii. If successful, the new 'grant scheme will commence January 2019. NB. It is not possible for the new grant to start at an earlier date so, during the two month period November and December 2018, the City will not receive a grant. This will create an unavoidable shortfall in income for that financial year of £3,500. Any delays to the grant application process may increase this figure.
7. **Public Consultation.** There is an established need to consult a variety of audiences on the contents of the new management plan (and to a lesser degree, the Countryside Stewardship Grant Application). Audiences will include, Local Communities, Local Authorities, Natural England and conservation specialists.
  8. **Committee Consultation.** Members will wish to retain an overview of the process and be provided with opportunity to comment upon and shape the final form of the management plan.

### **Options**

9. To ensure continuity of management of the ancient heathland a new management plan must be developed and approved by this Committee by November 2018 for commencement on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2019.
10. To ensure, as far as is practicable, the continuity of grant funding to support the work programme of the new management plan, it will be necessary to submit an application under Natural England's Countryside Stewardship Scheme.
11. To ensure continuity of input from local audiences and maintain the scientific rigour of the management plan, a consultation programme must be developed and pursued.
12. To ensure appropriate governance, Members must be satisfied that they have suitable oversight of the development of the management plan and associated grant application. Traditionally this has taken the form of either the involvement of the full committee or that of a Working Party of Members.
13. The Assistant Town Clerk has recently advised *against the creating of more working parties and would advise members were consulted via or at full Committee meetings instead; this is due to the volume of committees already created and the strain on resource.*

14. Members are advised that a similar programme is due at Burnham Beeches SSSI commencing 2019, for completion in 2020. A new Countryside Stewardship Scheme application is also required for Burnham Beeches and will be developed and submitted at the same time as the Countryside Stewardship application for Stoke Common.
15. The development of new management plans and associated Stewardship Schemes for the remaining 7 Commons of the Division is due to commence in 2020 for completion in 2021.

### **Implications**

16. All of the actions outlined in paragraphs 9 - 12 are essential for the delivery of the Stoke Common management plan, grant application and continuing heathland restoration works that together will maintain and improve the site's current condition as a SSSI. The option of doing only some or perhaps none of the above would jeopardise the long term funding of the management of the site and the City's local and wider reputation.
17. As Stoke Common is an SSSI the City is obliged 'to have regard for biodiversity conservation'. Natural England aims to achieve a target ensuring to ensure that 95% of SSSI's are in 'favourable' or 'improving' condition'. A management plan approved by Natural England is the most effective way to ensure that Stoke Common assists Natural England to meet their target and thereby attract Countryside Stewardship Grant funding.
18. However, there is no guarantee that applications under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme will be successful. Should they be successful there is also a risk that the grant funding will be less than that provided by the current Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. This position presents a substantial financial risk that cannot currently be resolved.
19. The cost of producing the management plan will be met from the Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common local risk budgets. Costs are likely to include consultation events, additional mapping/surveys and the publication of the final document(s). It is thought that these costs will not exceed £7,500.
20. Having been consulted on the production of this report the Human Resources Department has concluded that there are no likely adverse implications.

### **Proposals**

21. It is proposed that the development of the management plan, grant application and public consultation exercise proceed according to the broad timetable shown in Table 2 below.

22. It is also proposed that the developing management plan is presented to this Committee for comment according to that same timetable.

23. It is further proposed that a final version of the management plan is submitted to this Committee in November 2018 for approval.

### Corporate & Strategic Implications

- This report supports the following Community Strategy Themes:
  - CV3. Working in Partnership
  - SA3. To provide valued services to London and the nation
- This report supports the following Open Spaces Business Plan Objectives
  - OSD1. Protect and conserve the ecology, biodiversity and heritage of our sites
  - OSD2. Embed financial sustainability across our activities by delivering identified programmes and projects
  - OSD3. Enrich the lives of Londoners by providing high quality and engaging, educational and volunteering opportunities
  - OSD4. Improve the health and wellbeing of the community through access to greenspace and recreation

### Conclusion

14. A new management plan, grant application and public consultation is required to ensure the continuing management, funding and community support for the City’s management of Stoke Common. The proposed timetable is as follows:

**Table 2.**

<b>Provisional Timetable</b>		
Nov 2017	Agree Governance and timetable	<b>Superintendent</b>
Jan 2018	Burnham Beeches Consultation Group (BBCG)	<b>Superintendent</b>
Jan 2018	Friends of Stoke Common (FOSC) informed	<b>Head Ranger</b>
Jan – March 2018	Produce 1 <sup>st</sup> draft new management plan	<b>Conservation Officer/Head Ranger</b>
Jan - March 2018	Consult experts - draft management plan	<b>Conservation Officer/Head Ranger</b>
April 2018	Update for BBCG regarding management plan	<b>Superintendent</b>
May 2018	Draft of management plan to EFCC for early	<b>Superintendent/ Conservation</b>
May 2018	Initial application for Countryside Stewardship	<b>Conservation Officer/Head Ranger</b>
July 2018	Public Consultation on draft management plan	<b>ALL</b>
Summer 2018	Develop full application for Countryside	<b>Conservation Officer/Head Ranger</b>
Summer 2018	Committee visit to Stoke Common	<b>ALL</b>
Autumn 2018	Finalise management plan	<b>ALL</b>
1 Nov 2018	EFCC ‘decision report’ on management plan	<b>Superintendent</b>
1 Jan 2019	Start date of Management plan	
1 Jan 2019	New grant schemes start	
<b>Key</b>	<b>Consultation Phases</b>	
	<b>Development Phases</b>	

**Appendices**

- None

**Background Papers:**

Stoke Common Management Plan – 7<sup>th</sup> January 2008

A review of the condition of Stoke Common SSSI by Natural England. 8<sup>th</sup> May 2017

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