

Committee(s)	Dated:
Epping Forest Consultative Epping Forest and Commons	24 01 2018 12 03 2018
Subject: Epping Forest Operations Programme for 2018/2019 (SEF 14/18)	Public
Report of: Director of Open Spaces and Heritage	For Decision
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Summary

This report outlines the conservation, visitor access and risk management projects proposed in the Forest for the year 2018/19.

The main theme for the habitats conservation work continues to be the grant-funded operations aimed at managing the Favourable Condition of the Site of Special Scientific Interest. The area to be worked remains at an increased hectarage of around 38 hectares across 17 of the 38 compartments to ensure that the 10-year commitments under the Environmental Stewardship Agreement with Natural England are met. Contractors, as in the last two years, will be involved in key areas of wood-pasture and grassland management. The grazing programme will continue to expand with the key aim being to unite the Bury Wood and Chingford grazing areas to ensure more extensive, less intensive grazing over a longer season.

The work programme also addresses key areas of risk, particularly those related to woody vegetation along highway verges, fly-tipping, rough sleeping and tree safety. An issue for the coming year will be the continuing response to and resources required in relation to the increased risk posed by tree pests and diseases. There will also be attention focused on aquatic Non-Native Invasive Species (INNS) principally New Zealand Pygmy-weed.

Access along the ride network is to be addressed through tackling over-growing vegetation through systematic survey and remedial work. A new improved design of bridge is to be installed at Whitehall Plain to improve north-south visitor access connecting with the Chingford Visitor “hub”.

Following a successful contract tendering process in 2015 and 2016, the programme will continue to improve the value for money we achieve using bulk contracts where possible. These contracts are proposed for retendering in 2018/19.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Approve the annual work programme as summarised in the main report

Main Report

Background

1. This report describes significant conservation, visitor access and risk management projects proposed in Epping Forest for the programme year 2018-2019.
2. The work outlined below is drawn from the 2004-10 Epping Forest Management Plan and subsequent documents and strategies developed from that Plan (see Background papers below). The habitat work is also determined by Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) *Favourable Condition* and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) *Favourable Conservation Status* priorities which have been agreed and approved by Natural England and are financially supported by Environmental Stewardship (ES) and Basic Payment Scheme (BPS).

Current Position

3. The Forest is in the final year of a 10-year ES agreement with Natural England for funding conservation work across the Forest grasslands, heaths, wood-pasture and also the grasslands of the Buffer Lands. The key elements in the ES agreement are:
 - 3.1 The continued grassland management through either or both grazing and mowing;
 - 3.2 The restoration of 390ha of wood-pasture habitat. The latter habitat work is covered by the ES's Higher Level Scheme (HLS) payments because it is a UK Habitat of Principal Importance.
4. Following a review of progress in 2015/16 to ensure the City Corporation meets its commitments by the end of the agreement, the scale of the HLS-funded wood-pasture work has been set at around 38 hectares per year across 19 of the 38 Forest Compartments. In 2017 we completed all works in two compartments leaving 17 to be worked in 2018. To accomplish this level of work across multiple sites there has been an increase in Epping Forest arborist teams' time spent on this habitat restoration, as well as more work by specialist contractors and the use of mulching equipment hired for specific suitable sites.
5. A total of 189 ha of our grass and haylage cutting and the bulk of our highway verge cutting is now undertaken by local contractors Warren Smith Farming Ltd and Bush Wheeler Services respectively. Their three year agreements ended in Dec 2017 and these three year contracts will be re-tendered in time for works to start in 2018. The grass and haylage work is subsidised by BPS and ES Entry Level Scheme (ELS) grants.
6. The habitat conservation works are supported by agri-environment payments from the Rural Payments Agency and Natural England, through both the aforementioned BPS and ES.

Proposals

7. The proposed 2018/19 programme focuses on the HLS wood-pasture restoration commitments, increasing the number of grazing cattle across Buffer Land and Forest grasslands and managing risks, particularly those related to woody vegetation on highway verges, tree pests and diseases, fly-tipping and tree safety. We will also be working on increasing the planned response to risks associated with Forest paths and tree root nuisance claims, both of which give rise to a significant number of our insurance claims.
8. Estates Maintenance Contract (EMC): In partnership with the City Procurement Service (CPS) the City Corporation will re-tender two bulk contracts, grass cutting and road verge cutting, on a three-year basis in 2018, The haylage contract has a further year to run on our three year agreement and following the good performance of our contractor we propose continuing with them for the third year.
9. Habitat Conservation Programme 2018 -2019: The key activities of the habitat conservation programme are described below:
10. **Wood-pasture Restoration:** In 2018/19 it is planned to work approximately 38 ha across 17 of the 38 Forest compartments, with the main highlights being:
 - Lords Bushes (Compartment 32) – where more work will be done in 2018-19 to catch up with work delayed due to ground conditions in the last two years
 - Barn Hoppitt (Compartment 29) – re-connecting ancient Oak areas to the grasslands and re-invigorating the thorn scrub
 - Bury Wood (Compartment 24) – continuing more than 30 years of wood-pasture restoration across this large compartment in the heart of the densest Hornbeam pollarded area;
 - Pillow Mounds & Comical Corner (Compartment 14) and Rushey Plain (Comp 10), both around High Beach– continuing work to open up around small ancient oak pollards and protecting ancient beech from soil compaction and erosion with soil mulching, natural barriers or fencing being considered around the two worst affected beech trees.
- 10.1 The majority of the wood-pasture restoration work is scheduled to commence from mid-July after the bird breeding season and, following the tree safety work, and will continue through to March 2018. It is anticipated that it will occupy the arborist teams for much of that time.
11. **Wood-pasture and Grassland Maintenance:** In 2018, around 94 ha of cleared wood-pasture will be cut with tractor mounted flails. It is proposed that this work will largely be undertaken with in-house staff, as in previous years, as they have the local knowledge and experience of the sites to ensure responsive and the best quality management of this important conservation task. Open grass areas across the Forest will be cut using a similar programme as in previous years with contractors undertaking around 50%, 72 ha, of the work.
12. Staff and volunteers will continue with the ongoing Skylark conservation activity on **Wanstead Flats**. At **Wanstead Park** Exchange Land support and advice will

be given to The Wren Group in its volunteer conservation work on the grassland mosaic there, which now supports important colonies of butterflies.

13. **Grazing:** last year, 2017, was our first full year of the in-house grazing operation with the Conservators' English Longhorn herd. It is planned that the number of cow grazing days will be increased in 2018 as the herd has grown in size over the last year. In particular, the main aim will be to achieve a combined Chingford Plain-Bury Wood grazing area, using a revised invisible fencing configuration, to ensure extensive grazing over a larger area which will match the long-standing extensive Fairmead grazing.
14. Re-establishing grazing across Barn Hoppitt (Compartment 29) and the completion of the invisible fencing loops there will also be reviewed. The independent grazing auditor will visit during the grazing season to observe and record the progress of the Grazing Strategy. The auditor is to submit his report towards the end of the 2018.
15. During 2018-19 the delayed construction of an enclosed pound at Fairmead car park will also be undertaken. As reported to your Committee in 2017 the Car Park would still be available for visitors except for those times when it is being used in occasional cattle management operations.
16. **Ponds/Lakes/Bogs:** Monthly monitoring for Floating Pennywort will be continued during 2018 using a specialist contractor with any outbreaks responded to as they appear. During 2017 we were able to highlight the substantial bankside erosion problems at Jubilee Pond to colleagues from the City Surveyor's Department. To safeguard the City's substantial investment in the re-lining of Jubilee pond improvement works led by the City Surveyors department will be progressed.
17. Following excellent clearance work at Speakman's Pond by volunteers from the Epping Forest Centenary Trust, we will be investigating how best to remove and control the smothering growth of the Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) New Zealand Pygmy-weed (*Crassula helmsii*). The objective will be to maintain some open water habitat through the regular removal of the pygmy weed. This is one of 19 Forest ponds invaded by this highly competitive species and similar work is likely to be carried out at Butlers Retreat Pond, which was opened up by staff in 2017, and may be considered for other sites dependent on results and resources.
18. Should *Froglife* be successful in its grant bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund then Cow Pond (subject to a separate report to Committee in January 2018) the restoration work at this site would begin with liaison with CoL Conservation Section staff.
19. More minor works, largely by volunteers, will continue to be planned for the Forest bogs to ensure water levels are secured and over-growing vegetation removed. These follow recommendations on bog conservation following a 2016-2017 survey of all Forest bogs by the County Botanical recorder, Dr Ken Adams (see Background Papers below). A volunteer task will be programmed as close to International Bog Day in July if possible.

20. 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:

20.1 Highams Park: An operational Individual Site Management Plan will be prepared for Highams Park which will draw together the existing and near term proposed activity. During 2018 it is proposed that we work with local volunteers to seek funding for restoring the original estate coach drive as a north-south multi-user surfaced path through the Park on the east side of the lake. The potential of constructing a pedestrian-only path on the west side of the lake will also be reviewed, seeking to protect the flora on both sides of the Park from erosion and compaction.

20.2 Ride improvements: A path improvement and maintenance plan will be completed in the first half of 2018 following an audit of paths in 2017. In the first instance this is likely to lead to increased work on overgrowing vegetation followed by works on the path side drainage. It is also likely that we will implement an annual path monitoring program to cover a proportion of the paths each year. Routine maintenance of path edge vegetation will be continued across the whole network.

20.3 Perimeter replacement Queens Green: The bollards at Queens Green, High Beach are deteriorating quickly and will be replaced with square sawn oak posts as used at Smarts Lane Green, Loughton in 2017.

20.4 Whitehall Plain Bridge and path: In association with the Department of the Built Environment we will look at erecting a new bridge or raised boardwalk across the River Ching on Whitehall Plain in the location of the deteriorating culvert bridge. In addition to the river crossing, sections of the paths leading to the bridge have been cut through by drainage grips creating muddy, deep hollows in places. Improvements over these eroded sections will be reviewed as possible additions to the bridge works.

20.5 Parkland Plan, Wanstead Park: Work on this project will continue in 2018 through the City of London's Gateway process to identify funding for progressing the improvement plan proposed in the Parkland Plan.

21. Risk Management Activity: Ongoing maintenance of highways edge vegetation will largely be contracted out through a three-year agreement with a local provider. In-house teams will focus on the more challenging locations where there are a number of constraints such as frequent parked cars and on maintaining sightlines at path and road junctions. One significant task will be the management of roadside elm alongside Bell Common, Epping which would be managed over the next 2 years by reducing the height of the elms to ensure the hazards of falling stems are removed.

22. Tree Safety: Trees identified for hazard removal will be a significant proportion of spring and summer programmes for the Arborist Teams. A potentially difficult tree safety operation, held over for a couple of years, is the re-working of the poplar and plane avenue at Woodford that leads up to the Winston Churchill statue. A community and stakeholder consultation document has been prepared and

depending on the outcome of this consultation exercise work will be undertaken in the summer of 2018. Currently dangerous trees have been worked in line with the tree safety assessments.

23. **Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) work:** The planned removal of Larch from The Warren Plantation (Compartment 15) in 2017 to manage a *Phytophthora ramorum* outbreak was delayed and will take place in summer 2018. Monitoring of Oak Processionary Moth will continue with control measures taken as required.
24. **Fire safety:** 6km of firebreaks are cut at least twice a year in the summer on Leyton and Wanstead Flats. The need for further cuts will be assessed depending on the prevailing grass growing conditions.
25. **Insurance claims:** In association with the City of London's insurance team we will be developing management policies for Tree Root nuisance and path management. These are two areas where each year we receive substantial legal claims and it is increasing evident that a review of practice is desirable.
26. **Large Raised Reservoirs (LRR):** Woody and herbaceous vegetation will be kept cut on raised reservoirs. Further works will follow on from the six monthly Panel engineer inspections and will be undertaken in association with the Built Environment Department. Following the filling of the Ornamental Waters at Wanstead Park the water management strategy will seek to ensure the running of a small stream from the Perch Pond to the Ornamental waters through the spring and early summer months, subject to water needs to keep the Heronry at an acceptable level.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

27. 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.
28. Epping Forest Management Plan - 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.

Implications

29. **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, together with funding from the City Corporation's Cyclical Work Programme. Additional grant aid will be sought where available to fund agreed activity.

30. **Legal** - Formal consent for these works has been sought from Natural England under Section 28E of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) for the SSSI and as required under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 in relation to the SAC.

Conclusions

31. The work outlined above covers a large number of the Forest compartments and addresses key access issues across the Forest ride and pathway network and also risk management work, particularly along Forest roadsides and boundaries. The habitats programme is the continuation of several decades of conservation work and a commitment to achieve the Favourable Condition of the SSSI compartments and Favourable Conservation Status of the SAC.
32. Volunteers will continue to be instrumental in delivering a significant proportion of the work on a number of key projects in 2018/19, including wood-pasture restoration and ponds work and their important contribution is acknowledged.
33. 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 as well as key areas of the wood-pasture restoration work.

Appendices

- **Appendix 1:** Map of ES Higher Level wood-pasture restoration areas

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 Feb 2013.
- Wanstead Park Conservation (2011);
- SEF 50/16 Epping Forest & Commons Committee Report: Epping Forest Grazing Expansion Plan Continuity Arrangements. 21st November 2016
- The Topology and Vegetational History of Some Epping Forest Sphagnum Bogs (Report to EF Conservators - K.J. Adams 2017).

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