

Committee(s)	Dated:
Epping Forest Consultative Epping Forest and Commons	13 06 2018 09 07 2018
Subject: Wanstead & Manor Flats Scrub Management Strategy (SEF 26/18)	Public
Report of: Director of Open Spaces and Heritage	For Decision
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Summary

Scrub forms an important part of the biodiversity heritage at Wanstead Flats. It also adds to the considerable aesthetic appeal of the Flats for visitors. There are however several substantial problems associated with scrub facilitating an environment where various forms of anti-social behaviour can be manifested.

To strike an important balance between both the biodiversity and landscape value of scrub, alongside the need to actively manage rough sleeping and persistent anti-social behaviour a revised management regime for the scrub on Wanstead Flats is proposed.

This report outlines a review of the scrub management issues on the Flats and presents a changed scrub management strategy for this very important biodiversity resource.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to approve:

- The introduction of a revised scrub management strategy for Wanstead and Manor Flats.

Main Report

Background

1. Wanstead and Manor Flats together comprise 449.7 acres (182 ha) of open heath and grassland at the southern-most part of Epping Forest. Historically the Flats were a grassy heathland, used by local commoners and drovers en-route to London's markets, for livestock grazing and it is likely that there has been grassland or heathland habitat here for over a thousand years. Today the area is made up of an intricate mix of recreational/sport grassland (including 50 football pitches), copse, scrub, acid grassland and ponds.
2. Scrub forms an important part of the biodiversity heritage at Wanstead Flats. It also adds to the considerable aesthetic appeal of the Flats for visitors. There are however several substantial problems associated with scrub facilitating anti-social behaviour.
3. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) Report 308 'The Nature Conservation Value of Scrub in Britain' (Mortimer et al 2000) describes scrub as 'including all stages from the scattered bushes to closed canopy vegetation, dominated by locally native or non-native shrubs and tree saplings, usually less than 5 m tall, occasionally with a few scattered trees. This includes carr, scrub in the uplands and lowlands (including wood edge habitats), montane scrub and coastal scrub'.
4. To help manage persistent Anti-social Behaviour (ASB) a revised management regime for the scrub on the Flats has been developed. This report outlines a Forest Operations Plan Development Note that reviews the scrub management issues on the Flats and presents a changed scrub management strategy for this very important biodiversity resource.

Current Position

5. The cessation of grazing on Wanstead Flats following the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) outbreak of 1996, led to an expansion of the area and density of scrub across the Flats. These new and expanding scrub habitats became an important habitat benefiting a number of key species. Heathland and grassland habitats have however been changed as a consequence of expanding scrub on them.
6. There are thirteen different scrub management areas on the Flats with varying objectives and history of activity. Overall, management has largely concentrated on controlling the spread of scrub and promoting a more diverse structure of retained scrub. A large part of the scrub management is funded under the Countryside Stewardship's Entry Level Scheme (ELS) and Higher Level Scheme (HLS).
7. A number of areas have however been cleared of scrub and cut at least annually to maintain them in a cleared condition to deter anti-social behaviour,

notably towards Sidney Road and around Jubilee Pond (Scrub management area 9) and elm scrub along Capel Road (Scrub management area 10) . To help restore the acid grassland communities scrub has been permanently cleared with any regrowth cut annually on the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) area of Wanstead Flats.

8. In assessing the management of scrub on the Flats the review considered six broad areas:

- a. *The impact of scrub on the biodiversity of the Flats:* Scrub on the Flats is extremely valuable for birds and invertebrates and is of enormous value as a breeding habitat and for during the migration period when the scrub provides shelter and food in the form of berries and invertebrates
- b. *The impact of scrub on the landscape of the Flats:* The scrub habitats play an important role in softening and screening the surrounding urban area in what could otherwise be an open and potentially 'bleak' landscape.
- c. *The impact of scrub on visitors to Wanstead Flats:* Overall the mosaic of scrub habitats provides visitors with a naturally compartmentalized ever changing landscape and uplifting wildlife experience for the many visitors.
- d. *Fire Management:* Gorse and Broom Scrub is particularly susceptible to the risk of fires during the dry summer months. Fires whether accidentally or deliberately set can present a clear danger to public safety and can damage the conservation value of the Flats. Liaison with the London Fire Brigade has emphasised the importance of compartmentalising scrub areas (see Appendix 2) and reducing the 'ladder effect' of scrub introducing fire to large trees.
- e. *Rough Sleeping:* Though the City Corporation does not define rough sleeping as ASB the presence of scrub actively provides cover for the growing social tragedy of rough sleeping.
- f. *Anti-Social Behaviour:* There are also significant negative aspects associated with the presence of scrub on Wanstead Flats. The 'screening effect' lent by dense scrub facilitates a range of ASB including drug taking; public sex acts; prostitution; fire setting and fly tipping.

Options

9. It is considered that the increasing area of scrub on Wanstead Flats is adversely impacting the grassland habitats, and as more areas of scrub mature towards woodland it is also declining in its habitat quality. The location of scrub communities is also having a deleterious impact on the public usage of the Flats.
10. The Forest Operations Plan Development Note considered three scrub management options in its review:
 - a. *No action*: Unmanaged scrub will quickly colonise the Flats and result in the loss of valuable grassland and heathland habitats. It would also do nothing to address the antisocial behaviour problems being faced;
 - b. *Maintain current conservation management*: The current conservation management program has resulted in restoring previously declining habitats and helped with biodiversity protecting. It has also had some impact on antisocial behaviour issues.
 - c. *Revised management emphasis*: Increased emphasis on tackling antisocial behaviour issues at the same time as seeking to optimise conservation benefits. This proposal seeks to identify low value conservation scrub areas and to manage these more for antisocial behaviour issues. Other scrub areas will have conservation priority. This option seeks to achieve a wider range of management needs than previously and is recommended.
11. The Forest Operations Plan Development Note identified three scrub management strategies as relevant to managing scrub at Wanstead Flats:
 - a. reduction in the proportion of scrub on an area;
 - b. maintenance of scrub in a favourable condition and;
 - c. the eradication of scrub across specific areas.
12. It is proposed that appropriate works will be identified and built into annual work programs for the Forest and included as part of the Annual work program package presented to the Epping forest and Commons Committee each year for decision.

Proposals

13. Scrub management works at Wanstead Flats will be modified to widen their objective to include active management of antisocial behaviour issues as well as maintaining conservation management objectives. Work proposals arising from this change will be presented as part of the annual work program report.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

14. 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.
15. Epping Forest Management Plan - The proposals match several 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

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). Additional grant aid will be sought where available to fund agreed activity.
17. *Legal* – Under section 7(3) of the Epping Forest Act 1878 the Conservators shall at all times as far as possible preserve the natural aspect of the Forest, and shall protect the timber and other trees, pollards, shrubs, underwood, heather, gorse, turf, and herbage growing on the Forest.
18. Under section 5(1) of the City of London Corporation (Open Spaces) Act 2018 the Conservators may, if it appears necessary or expedient for the proper management or husbandry of the Forest and its flora and fauna, undertake the cutting, felling, lopping, chipping, mulching, swaling, cultivation or collection of any trees, pollards, gorse, heather, turf, grass or other shrubs, crops or herbage.
19. 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 Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and as required under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 in relation to the Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

Health Implications

20. The works contribute towards local strategies to actively manage rough sleeping and discourage ASB issues such as drug taking, prostitution, fire setting and fly tipping and their associated health risks.

Conclusion

21. Increasing concern over anti-social behaviour problems at Wanstead Flats has led to a review of scrub management on the Flats.
22. It is proposed that scrub management on the Flats be modified to strike a more effective balance between conservation management and the need to tackle persistent ASB challenges.
23. The revised management works will be reported on annually as part of the Work program reporting to the EFCC.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Forest Operations Note: Wanstead Flats Scrub Management
- Appendix 2 - Wanstead Flats: Scrub Management Areas

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