

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Epping Forest & Commons Committee	18 November 2019
Subject: Superintendent's Update	Public
Report of: Superintendent of 'The Commons'	For Information
Summary	
<p>This report provides a general update on issues across the nine sites within 'The Commons' division that may be of interest to members and is supplementary to the monthly email updates.</p>	
Recommendation	
<p>Members are asked to note the contents of this report.</p>	

Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common

1. The adjacent quarry site remained operational throughout the summer, making good progress with just one more 'cell' to be started. Dust and hydrology monitoring levels continue to fluctuate but do not show any major concerns.
2. South Bucks District Council (SBDC) have submitted the Local Plan to the Secretary of State, see separate report for more details.
3. The Heathrow Biodiversity Offsetting project has made good progress. A draft discussion document has been produced and circulated to key landowners and interested partners and detailed discussions have now started. Artwork was commissioned as part of the process to help with 'visualisation'. Further meetings have since been held with the Dorney Wood Trust and their various tenants. A meeting was also held with Heathrow Airport Ltd to review a first draft of the Memorandum of Understanding. Following that meeting a new draft was produced and once finalised will be presented for approval under delegated authority, as agreed at the September 2019 meeting of this Committee.
4. Detailed planning for the Burnham Beeches Management Plan has continued. A public consultation event was held on 26, 27 and 28 October on the Main Common with a structured display and associated questions. A new 'vision' display was commissioned to help illustrate some of the management principles under review. Over 900 visitors attended the 3-day event. The Mt Plan will be amended following the results of the consultation exercise with submission to this Committee currently on track for approval in January 2020.

5. The minor leak in the dam structure of Middle Pond remains under investigation. A chamber in the middle of the dam was recently excavated and cleared of debris. A stopcock was found but there was no evidence to suggest that this, or the chamber itself, were contributing to the leak. The City Surveyor has provided a suite of possible solutions to resolve this issue with an estimated cost of £225,000. However, the matter is considered to be of low risk so a capital project is not feasible under the current financial circumstances. The structure will continue to be monitored with minor exploration works undertaken as local risk budgets allow.
6. Contractors have been working on Stoke Common doing the last major tree clearance for heathland restoration on three separate parts of the common. Around 1.45 ha of small trees were removed and taken off site as woodchip. Each area was mulched following tree clearance to stimulate heathland seedbed and this technique has been very successful at the common previously. This work was funded by the Countryside Stewardship grant.
7. Contractors have also felled two larch plantations on the west side of the Beeches, which will be restored to wood pasture. Young Beech trees were retained where possible and these will be cut as pollards this winter. This work was funded by the Countryside Stewardship grant, as the trees were too poor to generate any income.
8. The cattle and ponies have been grazing various parts of the Beeches over the last couple of months. The ponies have moved back to the Beeches from the North Common at Stoke Common in September. The grazier's cattle have now been removed from the Main and West Common at Stoke Common.
9. A new 10 year conservation grazing contract at Stoke Common has recently gone out to tender with the new contract commencing April 2020.
10. The ecology volunteers have been busy over the summer with regular monitoring of dust and invertebrates. The remaining annual vegetation monitoring plots have been completed. A placement student from last winter has been back to work with us for a few weeks and a 'thank you' outing to a local arboretum and a guided tour of a National Trust property led by a past volunteer, has taken place.
11. Practical volunteers have been busy constructing a new stock fence, which replaces an older one and increases the area grazed at Burnham Beeches. They have also started scrub control on Stoke Common and the Beeches concentrating in areas that get wetter in the winter months. As ever this small scale and relatively gentle habitat management activity is an essential part of caring for these nature reserves.

12. Species inventory work has included a spider survey of Stoke Common and a visit by the Bucks Fungus Group to Burnham Beeches. The mire areas proved best for the fungi this year with a re-find of a tiny toadstool that has yet to be identified, fresher material hopefully means this can be determined now. The pony dung also provided an interesting toadstool!
13. A presentation about some of the results of the long running (27+ years) pitfall trapping of ground running invertebrates was presented at the 18th International Congress of Myriapodology (millipedes and centipedes) in Hungary . A poster presenting the results of a student project on squirrel damage on trees in wood pasture was displayed at the 18th International Conference on Life Sciences for Sustainable Development in Romania. Both were delivered at no cost to the City of London.

PARTNERSHIPS

Kenley Revival update

14. The last remaining post funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund ended on September 13 and consequently there are no project staff employed. This essentially means that the delivery of educational and engagement work by the project has ceased. However, the City funded Legacy Officer has been very active in maintaining opportunities for people to engage with Kenley's heritage through guided walks, talks, school visits and electronic media postings.
15. The City's legal advisors, Beale and Company, have written to the Buildings Research Establishment (BRE) with a series of questions following receipt of BRE's final report on the performance of the 'trial panels'. These questions are intended to assist in deciphering how BRE's analysis of the outcome of the trial panels impacts upon their earlier conclusions and where liability in respect of the Thaumaside sulphate attack lies.
16. The travelling exhibition was delivered on September 10 and is currently on display at the Kent Battle of Britain Museum where it will remain until November 2.
17. The signage contractor is still working on the design of the on-site signage. This element of the project has taken a lot longer than anticipated. Approval to manufacture the signs was given in December last year following sign-off of the artwork.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

18. Staff vacancies remain a concern with the Ranger team currently carrying three full time equivalent vacancies and one full time equivalent maternity leave cover. An Assistant Ranger is being recruited to provide the maternity leave cover. Other

posts are to be recruited on fixed term contracts as a means of maintaining adequate levels of service until the Division's structure can be reviewed.

19. A new grazing system for the cattle is being trialled. Woodplace Farm field has been chosen as a secure site to test using 'No Fence' technology. The system uses similar components to Virtual Fencing but without the need for a buried wire to carry the signal that 'contains' the cows within the enclosure. Enclosures can be plotted on a dedicated app and is activated using satellites and the 2G network connected to a collar worn by the cows. The cows are discouraged from crossing the invisible perimeters through a series of high-pitched noises as they approach. They receive a short electrical shock if they persist and attempt to cross the 'invisible' perimeter of the enclosure. Since the trial started, the cows have adjusted to the collars well, the number of shocks have decreased, and they are aware of the virtual fence lines. A representative from the company visited the site in September and has been assisting the Livestock Ranger to ensure the system is working to prescription. If successful, this new equipment has potential to further revolutionise the way we graze some of the open spaces. The technology provides data rich information on the movement and behaviour of each animal as well as instant alerts should an escape occur. The area of pasture can be very easily altered using the app on a mobile phone or tablet.
20. The Ranger team have started infrastructure checks across all sites to assess the condition of items such as gates, benches and bridges need repairing or replacing. Tree safety assessments are also being carried out on medium to high-risk areas and routes.
21. The calves on Farthing Downs have been separated from the cows so they can be weaned. Rangers and volunteers carried out the roundup of all the cows on Farthing Downs from three separated groups. This included a quick check up on the collar battery and condition of the 'No Fence' cows. The calves are now grazing Western Front South, Kenley Common on fresh grass, which will provide good pre-winter feed, and the cows will remain on Farthing Downs until December. The calves will be moved to The Grove on Coulsdon Common to join the heifers.
22. Goats are grazing the quarry on Riddlesdown Common. The sheep have been grazing Upper Woodplace Farm fields on Farthing Downs and the Bullpen on Riddlesdown Common and have recently been gathered by the livestock ranger and sheepdog and moved to Coulsdon Common.
23. Contractors have been working on Hilltop, Kenley Common as part of ongoing work to restore what was once chalk grassland meadow. Now that the work has been completed and much of the scrub has been cleared, seeds still stored in the soil can germinate including species such as Birds Foot Trefoil and intricate flowering orchids

like the Man and Bee orchids. This is helping to recover one of Europe's rarest habitats.

24. A new drinking fountain has been installed on Farthing Downs. This is located by the car park and will serve walkers, cyclists and visitors. Reaction to this has been positive and users to the site are being encouraged to bring reusable bottles to reduce single use plastic consumption. The success of this scheme will be monitored and may be used at other sites across the Commons to help the public reduce their use of plastic bottles.
25. A mixture of events has been held including a dusk mammal walk, bat walk, fungi forays, an introduction to moth trapping, for International moth Night 2019, and a Hedgehog home workshop. Events are planned across half term for families and children including a fire and food activity, self-guided nature trail and an evening wildlife walk.
26. The Management plan for Farthing Downs is being edited. Amendments to the new maps for Farthing Downs and Kenley Common are being carried out by the contracted designers. The vision for Farthing Downs and Kenley Common is now complete and a meeting planned to prepare a draft vision for Coulsdon Common.
27. The Rangers cleared an area of secondary Oak woodland on the main grazing area of Riddlesdown Common. This was done to increase the area of chalk grassland and light levels for ground flora and fauna. The arisings were mulched or placed as habitat piles in the surrounding woodland and the usable timber has been stacked for removal.
28. Corporate and local volunteer groups have been removing Hawthorn saplings using tree poppers on 8-acre, Farthing Downs and Hilltop, Kenley Common. Additional tree poppers were purchased to enable more volunteers to use them. Warlingham School spent a morning volunteering on Kenley Common as part of a 'community give back' day. Twenty students cleared scrub from around the rifle range, which was done to improve access and visibility to the heritage feature and allow contractors to remove graffiti.
29. The Superintendent, Chief Executive of Natural England and Cabinet member for Croydon Borough Councillor, were interviewed by The Telegraph for a weekend feature article concerning the creation of the South London Downs National Nature Reserve.
30. The South London Downs National Nature Reserve map boards have been installed on all four sites. These are found on the reverse of the wooden information boards.

31. Haymaking is complete across all sites. Bailed hay has been prepared and stored in the Merlewood Estate yard ready for the overwintering cattle. Volunteers assisted with hay-raking on West Wickham Common.
32. An injured male Kestrel was found on Riddlesdown Common and handed, by Rangers, to a wildlife charity. Unfortunately, following a veterinary examination, the bird was euthanised due to a chronic intestinal illness.

Ashtead Common

33. Contractors are still on site removing OPM nests. Most of the high-risk zones have been cleared, but increasingly nests are being found in places where habitat management work is being undertaken. A significant increase in OPM infestation is being recorded. Approximately 1,000 nests have been identified in around 500 trees.
34. Mole Valley District Council postponed a consultation on their Local Plan because of the prospect of a general election and resultant purdah. The Superintendent proposes to comment on the plan when it is released for consultation at a future (yet unspecified) date.
35. Interviews were held for the post of Apprentice Ranger on October 17. The Administrative Assistant for the Division was successful and commences in her new role today (November 18). The apprenticeship will last for 15 months, during which time they will gain a level two qualification in Environmental Conservation with Sparsholt College.
36. Treework Environmental Practice has been commissioned to update the individual management plans for the veteran oak pollards. This work is needed to reflect a changed approach to retrenchment pruning that was introduced locally as a result of observing and analysing the response of the trees on Ashtead Common to cutting. However, national guidance also reflects this altered approach, so the new plans will ensure we stay at the forefront of good practice. It is likely that the plan will form the basis of an application for Countryside Stewardship funding in 2022.

Support Services Team

37. The Support Services Officers at Burnham Beeches and Merlewood Estate Offices both submitted requests for flexible working arrangements (compressed hours). These have been agreed and their hours compressed, as per the requests. Careful consideration and planning has been required to accommodate the new ways of working within the small team.
38. The Administrative Support Officer at Merlewood Estate Office has been successful in their application for the position of Apprentice Assistant Ranger at Ashtead

Common. We wish the new Apprentice good luck in her new career. The vacant post will be recruited as a fixed term contract.

39. The Support Services team at Burnham Beeches have been engaged with the public consultation process for the new Burnham Beeches Management Plan, liaising with suppliers and assisting with the production of the plan. They have also been available on site to answer any questions from visitors.
40. The team has supported the identification of potential ways to meet efficiency and income targets as a result of the Fundamental Review.

Incidents

Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common

41. Incidents in the period included: damage to an area of the Beeches being caused by mountain bikers digging ramps, a formal warning was issued to a visitor whose dog fouled the Beeches, and several reports of fungi picking at Stoke Common have been investigated.

Ashtead Common

42. The team is currently working through actions generated by the Lyme Disease Action Plan that was introduced because three individuals contracted Lyme disease as a result of working on Ashtead Common this summer. An example of this is that all volunteers, staff and contractors now carry a plastic (degradable) card alerting medical professionals to the possibility of Lyme disease if they present with associated symptoms. Colleagues from Occupational Health helped with the wording for these cards.
43. Following an intervention by the Superintendent the British Museum reviewed a recommendation to return three copper alloy vessels to the person that had illegally excavated them from the Earthworks. The British Museum accepted that the wider context of the site, including its charitable status, means that the City has a greater claim over the objects than the finder.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

44. Two fly tipping incidents occurred on Farthing Downs in September. The first was dumped directly onto the Common and was cleared by a Ranger. The second was dumped on the highway so was cleared by Croydon Council.
45. Three individuals, driving recklessly, on unregistered motorcycles were seen on Coulsdon Common. The vehicles were traveling at speed, churning up ground and

completing circuits of the common. A member of staff approached the individuals but was met with a hostile and abusive reception. The incident was reported to the Metropolitan Police.

Filming, major events and other activities

Burnham Beeches

46. The Beeches hosted numerous external events: including the annual Rotary Club 5k & 10k runs, numerous school visits, Nordic walking & simply walk events and supported activity visit by Cub Scouts from local groups undertaking conservation tasks.
47. Events have included several guided walks and the autumn half term woodland wonders trail.
48. A 2-week long community archaeological investigation of one of the ditch and banks running through the Beeches was organised by the Chilterns Hillforts Project (Heritage Lottery Fund). A total of 451 volunteer hours were spent exposing the original profile of the ditch and bank and looking for any artefacts that might help date it. Staff from across the Open Spaces Department also assisted in the excavation. The bank appears to have been constructed on top of soil brought into the area, which is intriguing. A draft report has been produced with a full version in due course. The investigation was not conclusive, but the bank and ditch feature was much larger than anticipated and may be related to a medieval (deer) park and the nearby moated farmstead rather than the Iron Age hillfort. A very popular public open day was held mid-way through the investigation including demonstrations of copper smelting and flint knapping as well as walks to the excavation. An artist was also in residence during the dig.

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