

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Epping Forest & Commons Committee	7 September 2020
Subject: Superintendent's Update	Public
Report of: Director of Open Spaces	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	
Members are asked to note the contents of this report.	

Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common

1. Volunteer Group activity at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common remained suspended throughout the period due to the Coronavirus outbreak. A few individual volunteers have been undertaking very specific tasks (such as livestock lookers, talking to members of the public about the livestock and carrying out ecological/hydrological survey work). Several volunteer litter pickers are also active to help staff with the huge extra amounts still being left.
2. Since the car parks at Burnham Beeches reopened on 18 May visitor numbers have remained at around 2 to 3 times normal levels for all days of the week with the attendant equivalent increases in litter, waste and the number of incidents of misuse all of which are dealt with by the Ranger team. Visitor numbers have declined slightly since the start of the school holidays and opening of other attractions but remain higher than usual for this time of the year.
3. Car park charges were restarted on the first weekend in June once pay by phone operations had been introduced to all carparks thereby supplementing the existing 'cash only' payment option. Around 50% of car park income is now through the Pay by Phone provider. High visitor numbers have resulted in the car park charge revenue in June and July compensating for most losses due to Covid closure and restrictions in April and May.
4. The cafe at Burnham Beeches has remained as a 'takeaway kiosk service' since reopening on the 3 June. The one way, socially distanced queuing system is working well and café report that to date they have been very busy, especially for ice creams!

5. The café is also selling face masks made by a local lady who is donating the proceeds to the Thames Valley Hospice. Her initial £500 target has been easily exceeded.
6. The site toilets opened on the 26 June, some cubicles remaining closed to ensure social distancing and a one-way system in place using different gates to those for the café.
7. Signage advising about COVID issues and social distancing has been regularly updated as the situation has changed. Website and social media have continued to be valuable in keeping visitors informed.
8. A six-week public consultation regarding the Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPO) commenced on 7th July and ran until 18th August. Information on the proposal to extend the existing orders for a further three years and how to make any comments was advertised widely on-site notices, circulated on social media, the website and in local papers. See separate report.
9. Work has continued regarding the local plan and development pressure around Burnham Beeches. See separate report regarding this in more detail.
10. Three new/replacement benches have been erected on Stoke Common based on nature themed designs from local school children and funded via donations from residents.
11. The Ranger team has still been working a slightly modified work pattern with staggered rotas to ensure cover and reduce congestion in the yard area at arrival/departure times. Other staff are mixing working from home with working in the office to ensure maximum efficiency while reducing risk. The exact balance is different for each member of staff depending on their tasks. The new office layout and routines are working well with social distancing now part of the normal work pattern, with for example, residential staff avoiding using the mess area in favour of non-residential staff, lines on the floor to help with social distancing and procedures in place to deal with deliveries and contractors.
12. The temporary Assistant Ranger's post has been extended for a further 6 months and is currently helping the Conservation Officer with biological data input in a pause between large-scale practical projects.
13. The Ranger team has continued to manage health and safety risks which has included plenty of interaction with visitors. Livestock management has included the return of the cattle to Stoke Common. The ponies and some of the cattle have remained in the large fenced area of the Beeches with the rest of the cattle being moved between various invisible fencing loops at Burnham Beeches.

14. Other habitat management has included the spraying of bracken at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common and spraying of Rhododendron regrowth, cutting bracken where it occurs under the old pollards and checking of tethers on several old pollards with help from the Hampstead Heath arborist team. A training/discussion session was held for a small number of staff to prepare for the winter old pollard cutting programme.
15. The summer mowing programme has been carried out including cutting the Main Common in the Beeches and areas of invasive species on the North Common at Stoke Common as well as major paths. Three fields at Hedgeley were cut, where the cattle graze each year to help with grassland conservation for the Parish Council when they are not required in Burnham Beeches.
16. A lichen survey of the old beech trees at Burnham Beeches (funded by Plantlife as part of their 'Back from the Brink' project) found several more locations for the Red Listed species *Pyrenula nitida* as well as other old beech bark community specialists. A full report is pending but the surveyor commented that the 'Pinhead Lichen Index' is now 10, meaning that the Beeches has reached SSSI quality for this group of species alone. There were also several species found that are new to South East England. A day of filming was carried out in the Beeches for a training video as part of this project.
17. A spider survey of Stoke Common carried out in 2019/20 concluded with some days of fieldwork in the spring. Nine species were found that are considered nationally rare. The species diversity was greater in the areas where the heather is older and taller (which is better for web building) so the area should continue to improve over time as the heathland restoration process matures.
18. Ecological work over the reporting period has included the annual vegetation monitoring and continuing survey of the young pollards. A local volunteer has helped with the butterfly transects on Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common.
19. Oak Processionary moth has been discovered for the first time at Stoke Common – six nests were located by Rangers and have been removed by the approved contractor. The Forestry Commission has been notified, as required for new sites in the control zone, and they have indicated that they will wish to spray the trees early next year. Discussions have started with Natural England and Butterfly Conservation regarding the potential negative impacts of doing this within a heathland SSSI.

The Commons Car park infrastructure project

20. This project will see the replacement of existing carpark charge infrastructure at Burnham Beeches and its introduction at Farthing Downs and Riddlesdown. The Director of Open Spaces signed off the Gateway 5 report at the end of March.

However, Covid 19 restrictions prevented necessary site meetings with contractors until the end of May.

21. The capital budget and expenditure codes have been set up for the physical delivery of the project which is split into 4 elements:

- i. ANPR & payment equipment & enforcement system supply and installation
- ii. Electric service installation where required for the above
- iii. Minor landscape and ground works required at each location
- iv. Condition signage & sign frame production

22. Orders for electrical service installation and groundworks have been placed for works to commence in September 2020. The main ANPR system contract and order is being issued through City procurement – likely start date of mid to end November 2020. Final signage details and production are being confirmed to meet the above timeframe.

23. Charge tariff options for all locations are being consulted on through local consultation groups in August and September and a decision report on this issue will be brought to the November 2020 meeting of this Committee.

24. Work on visitor information FAQs and on ensuring all back-office functions for collection of revenue are established for the system to go live in November.

PARTNERSHIPS

Kenley Revival update

25. The onsite signage has been installed. The suite of 23 signs comprises six large wing-shaped signs to convey the significance of the historic landscape and basic site information, four small wings to mark features of interest and 13 tabletop information panels. Each sign will soon have a small pad of hard surfacing installed around it.

26. The Legacy Officer continues to work with volunteers to research and produce articles, newsletters and printed resources to engage people with the story of Kenley Airfield. A leaflet has been produced to accompany the new onsite signage and new articles are regularly posted on the website. Memorial signs commemorating Kenley's losses during WWII have been installed to mark the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Britain.

27. Graffiti on the Rifle Range was removed, and a graffiti resistant coating applied. However, this did not stop further graffiti appearing soon after on the wall and one of the fighter pens. This too has been cleaned off. We are now investigating the use of covert cameras to prevent further anti-social behaviour.

28. An article appeared in the Sunday Express on July 26 headed 'Bid to save crumbling Battle of Britain site.' Overall, the piece was descriptive and tame in nature, but it highlighted the issue affecting the conservation works. It quoted from the statement

issued by the City saying, 'We are committed to delivering this conservation project of great historical significance.'

29. Efforts to resolve the defects affecting the conservation work continue. At time of writing, we have received a report from our appointed expert giving his view on whether there was a general failure to warn. We are currently working with colleagues in Corporate Contracts and our legal firm Beale & Co to assess the implications of his opinion. The mortar defects issue was mentioned in a recent edition of the Sunday Express and the City was quoted.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

30. All Volunteer Group activity and events on the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons remain suspended. Individual volunteers have been checking livestock throughout the week alone which has helped support the duties of the Ranger team.
31. The Ranger team have maintained social distancing working by carrying out tasks independently on individual sites and minimising time spent in the office and yard. Other staff are mixing working from home with working in the office to ensure maximum efficiency while reducing risk. The exact balance is different for each member of staff depending on their tasks. The new office layout and routines are working well with social distancing now part of the normal work pattern.
32. Gated car parks at Farthing Downs, Riddlesdown and Spring Park have been reopened as of Friday 15 May following the announcement of the lockdown restrictions easing. The sites have generally been quieter since the last update but remain well-used throughout the weekdays and weekends. Following anti-social behaviour in the overflow car park at Farthing Downs, this car park has been opened only at weekends to reduce the risk of similar events occurring whilst providing surplus parking when the site is busiest. Interactions with visitors have shown how much the Commons have been needed during lockdown and their importance for people's well-being and mental health.
33. The first of the adult brown hairstreak butterflies have been spotted at Spring Park following a successful rotational cutting of blackthorn habitat. Brown hairstreak egg surveys were carried out and identified Spring Park as one of the best breeding sites for this RDB species in the SE.
34. The newly made earth bund at the Riddlesdown car park will be seeded with chalk grassland species provided by Butterfly Conservation as part of the local Brilliant Butterflies project funded by HLF for the benefit of chalk grassland invertebrates. Plug plants will be added at some point in the future to supplement the seeding.

35. As part of the same initiative, the meadow at Spring Park will be sown with a local wildflower mix specifically designed to provide additional nectar sources and support a greater diversity of butterflies, moths and other invertebrates. The site has benefited from reduced amenity mowing over the last few years and the arrival of wildflowers including greater yellow rattle is positive indicator of diversification potential. Rangers have met with partners from the Brilliant Butterflies Project and will be determining seed quantities in September once the hay cut has been completed.
36. A Woodland Management Plan for the West Wickham Commons has been drafted and sent to the Forestry Commission for review. The plan will support the actions to be set out in the 2021-2031 management plan for both Spring Park and West Wickham and help secure a grant for management actions.
37. The main herd of Sussex cattle having been grazing Farthing Downs since May. The remaining herds of cattle and sheep have been grazing compartments across the Coulsdon Commons to fulfil the obligations of the Countryside Stewardship Agreements currently in place.
38. Contractors have completed works to install 'bunds' on the stretch of Stites Hill Road that dissects Coulsdon Common to prevent vehicles from accessing the site. A section of the new bunds at the base of the Stites Hill dip have been eroded by flash floods in the recent storms.
39. Rangers have been working with the Happy Valley Ranger, (Croydon Council) and The Friends of Farthing Downs and Happy Valley to install new wooden marker posts as part of the Farthing Downs and Happy Valley Nature Trail. The Friends of Farthing Downs secured funding from the central grants programme. The trail will have audio descriptions for each of the 29 posts, a reprinted booklet and will be dubbed in four popular languages: Hindi, Polish, French and Urdu.
40. The Rangers have been collectively pulling Ragwort across the Commons. This year's effort has been difficult without regular and seasonal volunteers, so the focus was on key areas and fields that were to be hay cut to avoid ragwort contaminating bales for cattle.
41. Hay has been cut and collected from fields on New Hill, Farthing Downs and Kenley Common in August with the remainder on Riddlesdown, Coulsdon Common and Spring Park to be done later in the month.
42. Other management tasks have included the removal of bullrush and invasive species in the Spring Park pond, clearance of hawthorn saplings on 8-Acre on Farthing Downs, mowing of bracken and low-lying brambles on Coulsdon Common and removal of birch saplings on the West Wickham Common heath.

43. Signage advising of the need for continued social distancing following the updated government advice has been displayed throughout the period on noticeboards and gates. The new CoL website and social media have been used to update visitors throughout and after the lockdown.

Ashtead Common

44. Public consultation on the 2021-2031 Management Plan has commenced. This is in the form of an online survey that has been widely distributed among the Ashtead community and beyond. The consultation will remain live through September and the results will be considered by the Consultative Group in October.
45. Visitor numbers have decreased significantly since other attractions reopened but remain higher than pre-lockdown levels.
46. Since March 23 staff cover has generally been restricted to one person in the workplace at any one time, backed up by others on duty and working at home if necessary. This is effectively a weekend level of cover, but for every day of the week. One team member has found it difficult to work at home, and since 21 April this person has been allowed to work at the office in isolation from other staff. Arrangements have been validated and a Blue Certificate is now displayed at the Estate Office.
47. The level of OPM infestation appears to be similar to last year. This is a surprise, because it was expected to rise again. There are indications that the predating fly might be present, and this might explain the levelling-off.

Support Services Team (SST)

48. The SST at Burnham Beeches is now working from the office on a rota basis to maximise social distancing and minimise general Covid-19 related risks. The SST at Merlewood (MEO) and Ashtead Estate (AEO) will return to those offices as of 1 September 2020 with similar restrictions.
49. The Business Manager has been working with the Head Rangers at MEO and AEO to ensure Covid-19 safety for the team as some members have requested additional measures, due to pre-existing health issues. Individual risk assessments have been completed in readiness for the return.

Incidents

Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common

50. There were 12 incidents in the period 1st July up to the 19th August.

51. Two incidents of encroachment are being dealt with - by Ranger team and the City surveyor. There were two fly tipping incidents one involving a lorry load of builder's waste dumped on the roadside at the edge of Stoke Common dealt with by or local Local Authority waste team.
52. The remaining incidents are a miscellaneous collection which included site sign damage at the Beeches and a bouncy castle on Stoke Common.

Ashted Common

53. There have been three minor fires, one of which was attended by the Fire Service.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

54. There were 16 incidents covering the period of 17 June to 19 August.
55. Two sheep were killed and another injured because of a dog attack on Farnet, Riddlesdown. After information was put out onsite and on social media, the person responsible has come forward.
56. There have been three incidents of anti-social behaviour including vandalism to a gate on Farthing Downs, loud music being played at night near Coulsdon Common, and an altercation between two visitor groups on Kenley Common.
57. The sewage leak from overflowing drains being dealt with by Thames Water on Lower Woodplace Farm Fields on 16 and 17 June has been resolved following several days of work onsite. More work has been needed on portions of the drains in the adjacent land to Farthing Downs and, following a dispute about access through the grassland habitat, Thames Water were refused consent to operate from the SSSI due to the nature of the heavy vehicles being used.
58. One incident of fly tipped building waste at the car park on Spring Park was dealt with by the Rangers. Evidence of addresses were found within dumped bags and referred to the appropriate local authority.
59. Other incidents included Rangers assisting police with a missing vulnerable person, a catalytic converter theft to a member of staff's vehicle outside of the Merlewood Estate Office, verbal abuse from a member of the public, livestock worrying and biker injured on Kenley Common.

Filming, major events and other activities

Burnham Beeches

60. All events and filming were suspended at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common until the start of August - some licences are being issued for small scale covid safe activities and filming enquiries are being received through no firm plans are in place at present

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