

Committee(s)	Dated: 16 November 2020
Committee name – Epping Forest & Commons Committee	
Subject: 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.	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly? Contribute to a flourishing society Shape outstanding environments	1,2,3,4 10,11,12
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	N
If so, how much?	NA
What is the source of Funding?	
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?	NA
Report of Colin Buttery, Director of Open Spaces Department	For Information
Report author: Andy Barnard, Superintendent of The Commons	

Summary

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.

Recommendations

Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

Main Report

Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common

1. Volunteer Group activity at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common recommenced on Thursday 8 October for the weekly practical group and Tuesday 20 October for the Eco-volunteers. One weekend task has also been held. COVID precautions are in place and risk assessments carried out. Volunteers must book on to tasks in advance and are working in groups of no more than six (including a member of

staff). Tasks have had to be modified to enable social distancing and minimum contact between volunteers who must bring all their refreshments with them. PPE and essential equipment (such as clipboards for the Eco-volunteers) have been given out so that each volunteer has their own for use. A few individual volunteers have continued undertaking 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. Practical group tasks have focussed on clearing scrub on both Stoke Common and Burnham Beeches. The Eco-volunteers have been plotting the distribution of wood ant nests.
3. Visitor numbers have remained high despite the schools returning. The autumn colours are usually the peak season for visitor numbers and this year is proving to be no exception with car parks filling quickly at weekends and numbers higher than previous years.
4. The cafe at Burnham Beeches has remained as a 'takeaway kiosk service' since reopening on the 3 June although there are a few tables and chairs. It remains popular.
5. The six-week public consultation regarding the Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPO) was completed with relatively few comments and supportive of extending the existing orders for a further three years. Work has been carried out to extend them.
6. The draft South Bucks District Council local plan has been withdrawn as a result of changes due to the county becoming unitary in May 2020. Despite this, the Burnham Beeches mitigation strategy Supplementary Planning Document continues to make progress and it has been accepted that this is required despite local plan being withdrawn. Public consultation on the mitigation strategy by Buckinghamshire Council (BC) has concluded. There were a large number of comments, some very lengthy. A report has been drawn up by officers proposing minimal changes to the document. Most of the comments related to issues that had already been resolved through the lengthy process of producing the strategy and associated documents. Once approved by BC members there will be a three-month period before adoption when it could be called in for judicial review.
7. Much of the infrastructure is now in place to enable car parking to be checked using automatic number plate recognition although this system is not live yet. Work is being done on new signage because of the changes. Negotiations are continuing with the local Highways Authority to put in place parking restrictions on

surrounding roads, something that is likely to become an increasing problem as visitor numbers increase over the autumn.

8. The Ranger team has still been working to a slightly modified pattern with staggered rotas but is closer to normal working now. Other staff continue to mix working from home with working in the office to ensure maximum efficiency while reducing risk. The office has become increasingly busy so ensuring support staff are in each day has now become essential. Social distancing measures and procedures for deliveries and contractors are becoming a normal method of working as the numbers continue to build.
9. The temporary Assistant Ranger has been able to input over 7,000 biological records onto the database over the two months spent helping the Conservation Officer, a great help in trying to get through the 10-year backlog of data.
10. The grazier's cattle are now off Stoke Common for the winter, but the ponies have grazed the North Common before coming back to Burnham Beeches after regular foot trimming. Half of the cows remained within the main grazing area at Burnham Beeches until the middle of October while the other cattle grazed a range of local community area and nature reserves. TB testing of the cattle has been carried out.
11. Habitat management included scrub control with a 'cut and collect' on heathland areas on Stoke Common with the cuttings removed to help reduce nutrient levels. In Burnham Beeches, the annual cut has been carried out on a variety of small grass and scrub areas. Roadside scrub has also been cut on both sites and an area alongside some houses on Stoke Common, which has been welcomed by the residents.
12. Preparations have started for the winter old pollard work. Clearance around the trees has started and arrangements made for the hire of equipment to carry out the winter work.
13. Contractors were used to clear trees and scrub from the final area on Stoke Common funded by the Countryside Stewardship grant. This was centred on a small quarry area and the clearance has helped to improve the conservation of this as well as improving the biodiversity.
14. The Rangers refurbished the cattle corral area at Stoke Common, which had been vandalised.
15. Although no Ranger led events have been held, planning is underway for a reduced and simplified events programme for next year.

16. Visitor 'welcome' signage is in the process of being reviewed and upgraded. These are the signs in the car parks that present general information essential for visitors.
17. A further tree has been found with the rare oak polypore fungus on it, in the same area as previous finds in Burnham Beeches. Butterfly transects have been carried out on both sites throughout the season by a local volunteer.

The Commons Car park infrastructure project

18. The infrastructure needed for the ANPR and payment machines has been completed at Riddlesdown and Farthing Downs. The physical machines and cameras have not been installed yet.
19. Charge tariff options for all locations have been consulted on through local consultation groups in August and September and brought to the November 2020 meeting of this Committee.
20. FAQs have been produced and distributed within the Coulsdon Commons team.

PARTNERSHIPS

Kenley Revival update

21. Hard surface pads have been installed around the 23 new interpretative signs. The signage supplier has agreed to attend site to deal with some minor defects.
22. Efforts to resolve the defects affecting the conservation work continue. The City's legal advisors, Beale & Co, recently reported on the position regarding the legal route to establish liability. The Conservation Contractor, PAYE, has visited site to advice on a technical resolution to the thaumasite issue. Their report is expected during the week beginning November 9.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

23. Volunteer activities on the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons recommenced under new guidelines. Volunteers must book on to tasks in advance and are working in groups of no more than six (including a member of staff). Tasks are staggered across each month with one task per month for each site. Tasks have had to be modified to enable social distancing and minimum contact between volunteers who must bring all their refreshments with them. PPE and essential equipment have been given out so that each volunteer has their own for use. Individual volunteers have been checking livestock throughout the week alone, which has helped support, the duties of the Ranger team. Volunteer tasks have so far been on Riddlesdown and West Wickham Common.

24. Contractors have started to replace the fence line along the A22/Godstone Road boundary of Famet, Riddlesdown. The new roadside fence will be slightly taller and sturdier to continue to hold cattle.
25. The Lord Mayor visited Kenley Common on the 21 September 2020 and toured the airfield, led by the Kenley Revival Project.
26. The earth banks at the Riddlesdown car park have been planted with plug plants and chalk grassland seed provided by Butterfly Conservation and London Wildlife Trust as part of the local Brilliant Butterflies project funded by HLF. The mix of 11 different species were carefully selected to support invertebrates.
27. As part of the same initiative, the meadow at Spring Park was sown with a local wildflower mix to increase the diversity of wildflowers.
28. The Rangers have started tasks on the winter work programme. These have largely included scrub clearance, tree safety and woodland thinning work.
29. A section of roadside scrub on Coulsdon Common has been cleared by contractors to increase visibility on a blind bend on Stites Hill Road.
30. Visual tree hazard surveys have been carried out on medium and high-risk routes across all sites. Several ash trees afflicted by ash dieback have been flagged up as hazardous and to be felled.
31. Contractors have finished clearing trees affected by ash dieback on New Hill. Extensive blocks of affected ash were proactively removed as part of a plan to curb tree failures in areas adjacent to houses on our urban boundary and near high-use footpaths.
32. Volunteers from the Downlands Partnership cleared an area of scrub in woodland on Coulsdon Common and removed hawthorn saplings on Hilltop at Kenley Common. All this management work was done through a grant awarded to the group.
33. The South London Downs NNR partners met on Riddlesdown to film a short video as part of a national launch for Natural England's Nature Recovery Network featuring the NNR as one of their case sites.
34. Rangers and a volunteer mycologist on West Wickham Common, Kenley Common and Coulsdon Common have carried out fungi surveys. An additional survey has been planned on Farthing Downs for mid-November.

35. A dead peregrine falcon was found on Farthing Downs with no visible injuries. The bird has been sent to the Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme for further analysis.
36. The calves on Farthing Downs have been weaned from the cows and moved to Kenley Common. Livestock have been treated, wormed and given new reflective leg bands so drivers can see the animals on the road at night. The barn at Merlewood is being prepared for receiving livestock from December.
37. A research project being led by a student from Hadlow College, is examining grazing patterns of cattle using GPS collar technology supplied through a student research grant. A small herd of the Sussex cattle are trialling this on Riddlesdown.
38. The consultation for the combined Spring Park and West Wickham Common 2021-2031 management plan is being conducted using an online Survey Monkey questionnaire. Initial responses to the questions about the proposed plan have been positive.
39. The updated Farthing Downs and Happy Valley Nature Trail is now live featuring audio narrated by well-known personalities including Joanna Lumley, Tony Robinson and Noddy Holder. The Friends of Farthing Downs secured some funding from the City of London Corporation central grants programme. The grant also covered the replacement of the wooden trail markers across the downs and on Happy Valley.

Ashtead Common

40. Public consultation on the 2021-2031 Management Plan was conducted using a Survey Monkey questionnaire during August and September. The Ashtead Common Consultative Group considered the 446 responses received when they met on October 15. Feedback was positive, with between 75% to over 90% of respondents agreeing with the new plan's proposals depending on the topic.
41. Volunteers returned on Thursday, 22 October under modified arrangements due to Covid-19. Once a week, two groups of five volunteers work separately (but in the same general vicinity) with a member of staff overseeing both assisted by a volunteer leader. In this way, each of the 40 volunteers can be offered the opportunity to participate once a month. Volunteers now bring their own refreshments a go directly to the worksite, where a socially distanced project has been set up with individual (sanitised) tools.
42. All staff are now generally working from the office unless engaged in tasks suitable for home working.

43. Contract work to manage trees and scrub is progressing as normal.

Support Services Team (SST)

44. The SST continue to work a combined rota in the office and at home to maximise social distancing and minimise general Covid-19 related risks.

45. All team members are progressing with the winter works programme, assisting contractors catch up with the lag from the previous lockdown and planning for the New Year.

46. the Administrative Officer for Merlewood and Ashtead Estate Offices will be leaving US the end of this month but wish them well in their new position.

Incidents

Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common

47. There were eight incidents in the period 8 September to 20 October. Most were small-scale vandalism and fly tipping events, but several were for fungi picking on both nature reserves, which is particularly wide spread this year. There were also two dog attacks on other dogs and a car break in.

48. One incident has been reported to RIDDOR i.e. an adult and child knocked/kicked over by one of the cows. Although several people were in the area the incident happened in a patch of scrub, so no one had a clear view. It seems that the adult was trying to get very close to the cows in order to take a picture of the child. Both were taken to hospital and discharged later the same day.

Ashtead Common

49. A minor sewerage leak occurred on October 11 affecting footpath 28. The leak was stopped on the day and rectified by 13 October.

50. A group of campers were moved on with no issues on 18 October.

51. A Ranger responded to a report of quad bikes on the common on 25 October.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

52. There were 12 incidents covering the period of 19 August to 3 November. Four were related to livestock including dogs chasing cattle and members of the public reporting a suspected aborted calf and a cow that had to be put down due to a broken leg.
53. Two groups of people launching fireworks from the cattle grids on Farthing Downs were moved on.
54. A car crashed into the boundary fence of Kenley Common from Hayes Lane causing damage to the concrete posts. A new post has been added to secure the fence.
55. A tree fell from Kenley Common onto a residential garden fence. After Rangers cleared it, the homeowner was put in contact with the City's insurer.
56. Other incidents included Rangers assisting paramedics to allow access to an injured person near to the Fox public house on Coulsdon Common, an injury to the member of the public after tripping on an anthill, one incident of fly tipping and the repeated theft of the time boards from the Farthing Downs car park.

Filming, major events and other activities

Burnham Beeches

57. A small number of licences have been issued for small-scale COVID safe activities including a Nordic walking and school groups.
58. Filming has included several days for a new ITV drama (Angela Black) and one for the National Film and Television School. The RSPB have filmed some general autumn shots for their stock library.

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