

Committee(s)	Dated: 8 March 2021
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?	N/A
What is the source of Funding?	N/A
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?	Y/N
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. Visitor numbers have continued to be very high, even during rainy days in term time, with paths getting much wider and very muddy. Due to serious concerns about the impact of so many people on the National nature Reserve was discussed at the Burnham Beeches Consultation Group meeting on 20 January. Following urgent discussions with Buckinghamshire Council, the highways

authority has put temporary (6 months) restriction notices along the roads through the Beeches and those feeding into the area to prevent roadside parking. From 1 February the car parking capacity within the Beeches was reduced by approximately half, while maintaining access to the café and blue badge parking areas. Some parts of the woodland have been cordoned off to encourage people not to walk through them and some new desire lines have been blocked to prevent access. A concerted campaign, both using notices on site and social media, was carried out to encourage people to stay local and to keep to the surfaced paths. The social media posts have included ecological information presenting a more subtle approach regarding the impact of visitors and feedback indicates that this informative approach has been appreciated.

2. Replacement of the general information signs in and around the car parks has been completed, with new welcome signs as well as the updated information about car parking. This has also included new maps and places for topical posters as well as the byelaws.
3. As a result of the changes to the car park capacity and the cordoning off of areas, patrolling by the Rangers has been kept at an increased level and they have been busy talking to visitors to explain the reasons and the consequence of not carrying out these measures. They also continue to be busy dealing with associated visitor issues, such as litter.
4. The cafe at Burnham Beeches has remained open as a 'takeaway kiosk service' and has remained very popular.
5. Volunteer Group activity at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common remains minimal with just a few independent individual volunteers doing on-going monitoring such as the hydrology points on Stoke Common.
6. The new car parking system with seven day a week charges and use of ANPR (automatic number plate recognition) has settled in well. Office staff continue to help those struggling with the technology to purchase season tickets and registering their blue badges. The removal of cash counting has been replaced by increased time spent dealing with computer-based payment issues.
7. All staff are continuing to work in a modified way due to the pandemic with those who can, working from home at least some of the time. Due to the very high visitor numbers having Rangers out on site as much as possible has been essential.
8. Natural England continue to liaise with Slough Borough Council (SBC) regarding planning applications for housing estates within the Borough that do not have enough mitigation regarding the impact of recreation on Burnham Beeches.

Discussions have started with SBC regarding the payment to Burnham Beeches of a s106 agreement for air quality monitoring

9. The Conservation Officer continues to follow up planning and development issues. Those in the last period have included with the Environment Agency regarding sewage overflow into a stream and destruction of a different stream as it flows through a neighbouring property. Both are long standing issues. Adjacent to Stoke Common there is a recent application for a model aircraft runway where we have asked for restrictions on flying over the SSSI.
10. The ponies are currently grazing at Black Park on an area of heathland. The cattle remain off-site in their winter quarters with a local farmer. Preparations for the return of the livestock have started with checks and repairs to the fences (both physical and invisible).
11. The veteran tree work programme has been completed for the year; however, the wet weather caused some alterations. The Mobile Elevated Work Platform (MEWP) was causing too much ground disturbance so after a few trees had been worked on a change was made and the local arboricultural company contacted which is used for tree safety work. They supplied climbers who had worked on the veteran trees in the Beeches before and were willing to work closely with the Ranger team. This was supplemented by the tree team from Hampstead Heath and has meant that only a couple of trees were missed because they were too fragile to climb and in difficult places to reach with the MEWP. All the clear up work following from the tree work has now been completed.
12. Contractors worked on an area of wood pasture restoration on Pumpkin Hill to link an existing area of open grassland to an area with a good number of veteran trees, which has become much scrubbier in the last 30 years. Trees have been thinned out and new pollards created from retained trees of the right size and shape. A stump grinder has been used to clear stumps to allow access to machinery for scrub clearance in the future.
13. On Stoke Common, Rangers have been continuing one day per week with the annual scrub control usually carried out by volunteers, which in the last period has included some larger trees along the edges of tracks.
14. Geological engineers have dug four boreholes in the dam structure of the Middle Pond in order to establish its composition and prepare a detailed specification of repairs that should stop the leak. The next phase will be the most expensive, so fund raising will be required before this can be carried out.
15. A virtual tour and question and answer session was carried out for students at Reading University in place of their usual site visit. This focussed on visitor issues and challenges, especially in the current circumstances.

16. The Conservation Officer has been liaising with the Conservation Manager at Epping Forest over monitoring techniques regarding the erosion and deterioration of habitat due to the high number of visitors. In the meantime, photographs of damaged areas have been taken, including some experimental pictures using a drone.
17. Partnership work with National Trust and Plantlife has continued, with plans for survey work for plants and invertebrates on land adjacent to Burnham Beeches.

The Commons Car park infrastructure project

18. The new payment system for the car parks at Farthing Downs and Riddlesdown has been running since 25 January 2021. New signage has been installed around the car park and time boards have been refreshed. Banners were added by the main entrances to the car parks along with a suite of communication material onsite and posted on social media.
19. Rangers were on hand during the initial week of introducing the new ANPR system to explain the rationale behind the charges and assist with any issues from visitors. Overall, interaction with local residents was positive with visitors generally in agreement on the financial costs of managing the sites and directing funds raised into to the Commons.
20. Croydon Council have installed restricted parking signs at either end of Ditches Lane. During lockdown, many cars have parked on Ditches Lane as overspill from the oversubscribed Farthing Downs car park. Restrictions and enforcement from the Council will help to maintain clear access for emergency service vehicles, reduce pressure on the SSSI from high visitor numbers and reduce erosion to the roadside bank and ditch bordering the downs.
21. A retrospective planning application has been submitted for the installation of car park infrastructure, including plinths, car park ticketing machines and poles for ANPR cameras at Farthing Downs and Riddlesdown. The planning authority required confirmation that the structures would not adversely impact the 'Metropolitan Open Land' designation.

PARTNERSHIPS

Kenley Revival update

22. PAYE Stonework and Restoration Ltd, the project's conservation contractor, has been instructed to develop design details and specifications to rectify the defects affecting the 2017 conservation work. Initial costings are expected to arrive during the week beginning 22 February 2021. A meeting of the Kenley Board is

scheduled for 8 March to consider options for implementing the rectification works. An issues and options report will then be presented to this committee.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

23. With the announcement of a national lockdown since December, volunteer activities have remained suspended and staff have been working remotely at home, on site and in the office based on work needs and weekly rotas.
24. Visitor numbers have still been phenomenally high across throughout the lockdown period. Car parks have been full by mid-morning and the trampling pressure on paths is causing issues with mud and access. Ditches Lane on Farthing Downs has been busy with parked cars on the verges and Hayes Lane bordering Kenley Common is regularly filled with cars each day.
25. All 11 of the Jacob ewes are pregnant having been scanned with assistance from the Downlands Project. Lambing is to take place in early April.
26. Except for two calves still due to be born, the Sussex cattle have finished calving. The combination of fewer staff around the estate office due to Covid restrictions and the prevalence of larger bull calves meant that this years' calving was more difficult than previous recent years.
27. The heavy snow and cold temperatures during early February meant that the Rangers had to check livestock multiple times throughout the day to thaw frozen water troughs and pipes and check foraging levels for the livestock still outside across the Commons.
28. Three Sussex cows have been grazing 13 acre Bury and New Field on New Hill for the first time in over 100 years using virtual fencing. Signage around the perimeter and approach to these areas have encouraged dog owners to keep their dogs under control and informed visitors about the new system. The cows have made good progress at knocking back rougher grasses for the benefit of low-growing chalk grassland plants.
29. The Rangers have carried out medium and high-risk tree checks across all sites. Remedial work to clear dangerous trees has been done by the Ranger team and contractors.
30. The Downlands Conservation Partnership carried out a week of conservation work on Farthing Downs with tasks including scrub removal on 8-acre and preparing a stock fence for removal on Tollers field.

31. On Kenley Common, Rangers have been clearing scrub to maintain the open chalk grassland on Hilltop and burning arisings from the tree popping of hawthorn in the summer.
32. The three new pond scrapes created in Plantation Woods on Kenley Common and another on Coulsdon Common are holding water well. Rangers will carry out surveys in Spring to see if amphibians have been using them and assess their viability as long-term habitats.
33. Applications for the Green Flag Award have been submitted. Coulsdon Common will be additionally be entered into the Green Heritage Award for 2021. If successful, this will be complete the set of both awards for all of the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons. The Coulsdon Commons Ranger and Information Ranger will be working on improving interpretation surrounding the local history of the Common.
34. Rangers have inputted over 100 records of species into an excel database based on incidental sightings whilst out and about on the Commons. This has confirmed several species that we suspected were using the sites but missed from the usual surveys each year.
35. A final draft of the West Wickham Commons 2021 – 2031 Management Plan has been completed.

Ashtead Common

36. The Ashtead Common Consultative Group met on February 22 and were happy to endorse the proposed 2021-31 management plan.
37. An application pack for Countryside Stewardship has arrived and work has begun on mapping options for funding. Predominantly the application will focus on veteran tree management, wood pasture restoration and wood pasture management. Options for Scheduled Monuments and grassland management will also be included.
38. The habitat management season finished on February 15 with ancient tree, scrub management and ride management work completed on schedule despite covid-19 restrictions.

Support Services Team (SST)

39. The Support Services Team having been navigating the new software and hardware associated with the car parking projects at Burnham Beeches, Farthing Downs and Riddlesdown. They are also busy dealing with members of the public

and assisting with any queries and complaints in respect of the new car parking charging arrangements.

40. Recruitment is under way for the position of Administration Assistant for the Merlewood and Ashtead Estate Offices. This is a fixed term contract in line with the current recruitment moratorium.

Incidents

Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common

41. There were 27 incidents in the period 20 October to 4 January. These included 6 instances of small-scale fly tipping, 4 incidents of site misuse (2 incidents of quad bikes being driven off road, 1 each of camping and fireworks). Nine incidents related to dogs with two formal written warnings issued for PSPO/Byelaw breaches. One serious instance of a dog not being under effective control, resulted in a jogger running through the Beeches being bitten. Unfortunately, the dog's owner in this incident has not been identified to date. The incident occurred in the area of the Beeches where dogs can be off lead.
42. A fixed penalty notice, issued in September for repeatedly failing to keep a dog on a lead under the PSPO, was paid in December.

Ashtead Common

43. An ongoing issue of quad bike incursions is being managed in collaboration with the police.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

44. There were 6 incidents within the period from January 4 to February 23. These related to illegal quad bike riding on Coulsdon Common, two incidents regarding dogs including a reported dog attack on Kenley Common and a loose dog on Farthing Downs, vandalism to a staff members' personal vehicle, a fire alarm activated at the estate office and metal detecting on Farthing Downs.

Filming, major events and other activities

Burnham Beeches

45. A small number of licences have been issued for small scale COVID safe activities including a small Nordic walking group and some school groups. Procedures have been updated to ensure that they are also COVID secure – but these ceased when the Beeches move to tier 4.

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