

Committee(s)	Dated: 12 July 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?	[insert relevant number(s) from p3 of Corporate Plan]
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 returned to more normal levels following the easing of the national Covid restrictions and car parks at the Beeches have been returned to normal capacity. Some heavily trampled areas have remained

cordoned off and new 'desire lines' have been blocked to prevent further damages. Some areas have begun to recover, at least aesthetically, as a result.

2. The team continue to liaise with Buckinghamshire Council regarding the temporary parking suspensions introduced on roads around the Beeches in February. The Council held a public consultation on making the suspensions around the Beeches, and other areas across Buckinghamshire, permanent in May and June. We await the results and conclusion of this work.
3. The cafe at Burnham Beeches has remained open as a 'takeaway kiosk service' and has remained very popular. Outdoor seating has been made available again.
4. Volunteer Group activity at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common has continued with small groups working on a range of typical summer tasks including path maintenance, setting up grazing loops, repairs to boardwalks and bracken whipping. Individual volunteers have continued the on-going monitoring programme and have also helped the Ranger team with tasks such as pond fencing, site repairs and production of information signs.
5. The Friends of Stoke Common and a handful of individual volunteers have undertaken the annual (though missed in 2020) 'whole site reptile survey' at Stoke Common. This has shown reptiles continue to increase and spread across the common into areas of heathland restored in the last 10 years. Some of the Friend's Group will also be carrying out bat monitoring at the Common for the first time this year as part of the National Bat Monitoring Programme.
6. The Eco-volunteer Group have also been active completing a survey of the wood ant nests across the Beeches and supporting the Conservation Officer with vegetation monitoring at both Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common.
7. The Ranger team have been ensuring the Beeches is grazed using cattle (in both traditional and invisible fence) and ponies, including grazing the majority of the Main Common.
8. Rangers have also been carrying out the necessary surveys for Oak Processionary Moth (OPM) at Stoke Common. Six OPM nests were found at the Common last year. Stoke Common is in the national OPM control zone and as a result we have been required, as a minimum, to survey all oak trees within 100m of any nest location from 2020. This year, found 45 more nests in 36 trees. The location of each nest has been recorded ready for nest removal in July. The team have adapted tried and tested (GIS) systems in use

at Hampstead and Ashted Common, to help deliver this first year of OPM survey work.

9. Annual squirrel trapping was undertaken throughout May and June, focussing on the areas of the Beeches where there are old and young pollards which are most badly impacted by their damage.
10. Plans for winter habitat restoration work programmes at the Beeches and Stoke Common have been drawn up and orders placed with contractors where required.
11. The Conservation Officer continues to check local planning applications but those requiring comment have declined considerably now the SAC mitigation strategy is in place.
12. Fieldwork has started on a review of the National Vegetation Classification of those areas of the Beeches restored to heathland, mire or grassland since the last survey in 1997. A volunteer botanist has been helping the Conservation Officer with this project.
13. The report and work programme for the young pollards at Burnham Beeches has been completed. There are 1,300 in the work programme some of which have now been cut three or four times and are starting to develop good saproxylic habitats.
14. Dartford warblers again bred at Stoke Common this year and nightjar were also heard calling on several evenings in June.
15. Partnership work with National Trust and Plantlife has continued, with survey work for vascular plants and saproxylic invertebrates starting on land adjacent to the Beeches. Already some rare beetles have been recorded in ancient oak trees on neighbouring farmland.

PARTNERSHIPS

Kenley Revival update

16. Work has commenced on rectifying the defects caused by thaumasite sulphate attack affecting the 2017 conservation work. The 12-week programme of work costing £161,000 is scheduled to finish by mid-September before the weather turns colder.
17. Several of the new Kenley Revival signs have been vandalised and now need significant repair. The signage supplier is due to attend site to assess the work

required, which will probably involve the removal of damaged signs for repair and further strengthening.

18. The project's evaluation consultants have been re-engaged to produce an addendum to the evaluation report. This additional section was requested by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and will summarise the impact of the signage and the City funded Legacy Officer post.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

19. The prolonged cold and dry spring limited the amount of vegetation growth for the Sussex cattle and additional hay had to be bought to supplement grazing on Woodplace Farm Fields on Farthing Downs.
20. The Sussex cattle are now grazing Farthing Downs. Smaller herds are grazing Famet, Riddlesdown and Western Front South, Kenley Common. The lambs born in April/May this year have been out grazing compartments on Coulsdon Common. These fields have been locked and secured to prevent worrying by dogs whilst the lambs become accustomed to the sites.
21. Our resident bull, Wilf, has been sold locally to the Downlands Partnership farm after a 3-year tenure on the Commons. A new bull will be bought in Spring 2022 to maintain the Sussex cattle breeding programme. A check-up on the cows in a few months will reveal how many cows are pregnant.
22. Site Rangers have been preparing for the upcoming Green Flag Award and Green Heritage judging. Coulsdon Common is being entered into the Heritage Award for the first time. If successful, this will complete the full set of Green Flag and Green Heritage Awards across the Coulsdon Commons. A new interpretation panel at the Windmill Paddock on the Common has been produced, highlighting the two windmills which once stood there, and the WW1 military exercises carried out nearby. Visits from Green Flag judges are planned for Coulsdon Common and Farthing Downs on 6 July.
23. New waymarkers have been created and installed across the Commons with clear icons and colours to help users keep to the correct right of way. The icons for these signs are being added to keys on new site maps. This has been followed by regular mowing of grass paths across all the Coulsdon Commons to discourage visitors from trampling through meadows.
24. Signs created with support from Natural England have been put up on Farthing Downs to emphasise the significance of the SSSI and Scheduled Monument designation and prohibited activities that could damage the site including illegal off-road vehicles and metal detecting.

25. A group Ranger task on Whyteleafe Bank, Kenley Common targeted young Hawthorn saplings with tree poppers to maintain the chalk grassland and benefit orchids and wildflowers.
26. Volunteer groups have resumed in groups of 5 to carry out practical conservation tasks. Tasks have included tree popping on Kenley Common, clearing dense vegetation along Rights of Way and repairing step-access into the Riddlesdown Quarry.
27. A section of 'tired' fencing at Tollers field on Farthing Downs has been removed by Rangers and volunteers after several years of wear. A new, more durable, fence will be added by the Ranger team to contain grazing livestock in this field.
28. The Farthing Downs, Kenley Common and Coulsdon Common management plans covering the 2021-2031 management period have been sent to the local consultative committee for comments and review. The team are now preparing and finalising the draft Riddlesdown Management plan.
29. An online consultation for the Kenley Common Management Plan is currently running to gather public feedback on the Plan's main actions. This survey will be active for 6 weeks through Microsoft Forms. So far, 181 people have taken part and their views generally align with the management actions proposed and are complimentary of how the site is maintained.
30. As part of a project for public fundraising across the Open Spaces Registered Charities, there is an active appeal to upgrade and refresh the interpretation panels at Farthing Downs. This project will focus on well-placed and informative panels to inspire and educate visitors on wildlife, history and landscape features and is being promoted via the e-newsletter, posters, social media and email banners/signatures.
31. Man orchids have been recorded on Stoney White Piece, reflecting the success of the chalk grassland restoration. Bee orchids have also been recorded on New Field for the first time. The late flowering season brought on by the weather has led to an overlap in orchid species being seen at the same time; in one 2m grid square, 6 different species of orchid were observed on 8-Acre, Farthing Downs.
32. Moth surveys have been carried out on Farthing Downs and Coulsdon Common; 59 species of macro moths were recorded at Farthing Downs in one night, including several species new to the site. A count of 8 glow worms on the 24 June at Farthing Downs was an early record for this species here.

Ashtead Common

33. Following the easing of lockdown restrictions on 17 May, the limit on volunteer groups size was relaxed, although other covid-19 controls like social distancing remain in place. The Monday volunteer group no longer meet, so drop-in practical conservation volunteering is now restricted to Thursdays.
34. A printed version of the new management plan was circulated to volunteers, members of the Ashtead Common Consultative Group and other stakeholders. The plan has been well received.
35. After an absence of 18 years a nightingale was heard singing on the common earlier in the summer for several days.
36. Schultmay Ltd commenced a fly survey in early June. This will run through the summer using a combination of trap types and some on-site surveying. Flies are listed in the SSSI notification but have not previously been surveyed.
37. The presence of black letter hairstreak on the reserve is noted. It is likely that this species has been illegally introduced, so its discovery is not being celebrated. However, it does appear to have become established and it means that all five hairstreaks can now be found on the common.
38. A specialist law firm Thwlegal has been instructed to produce an internal agreement in support of the Countryside Stewardship application. This agreement is considered necessary by the RPA to define the roles of all parties with an interest in the proposed Countryside Stewardship agreement.

Support Services Team (SST)

39. The relatively new Administration Assistant for Merlewood and Ashtead Estate offices has now been in post for three months and fitting in to the team very well. Their fixed term contract period has, fortunately, been extended until the end of December 2021.
40. The team continue to busy with numerous projects including building lets, car park income reconciliation, establishing procedures for the new and complex IR35 requirements for our contractors and dealing with numerous enquiries from members of the public as well as maintaining Covid safety systems at the Estate offices.

Incidents

Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common

41. There were 18 incidents in the period. These included 3 instances of fly tipping, 1 where rubbish was dumped for about 400m along an adjacent road – 5

incidents of site vandalism/misuse (3 graffiti/ 1x vandalism of a pond fence/ 1 x small fire). The rest were a variety of lost dogs, travellers taking horses and carts off road onto the Beeches, injured wildlife and visitors in need of assistance including the rangers helping emergency services to get a casualty out of the woods in a site vehicle

Ashtead Common

42. A drone was flown over Woodfield on 1 May. The owner was spoken to by a Ranger who explained that on Ashtead Common the flying of model aircraft breaches the byelaws.
43. A potential pollution incident affecting the Rye Brook at the Two Bridges outfall was reported to the Environment Agency and Thames Water on 13 May.
44. The poor condition of pollution control bunds in the Rye Brook at Two Bridges was reported to Thames Water on June 23.
45. A light fitting fell from the top of the lift shaft at the Ashtead Estate Office sometime during the night of 23-24 June following a service visit on 23 June. This was reported as a near miss.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

46. There were 10 incidents within the period from 22 April to 25 June . These related to verbal abuse to a Ranger from a vendor trading at Farthing Downs, a small woodland fire at West Wickham Common, an injured deer, a group of suspicious males parked at the estate yard, a campfire on Farthing Downs, an ongoing incident of overflow drain flooding after high rainfall, and 3 incidents of fly tipping and vandalism.

Filming, major events and other activities

Burnham Beeches

47. Silverback films filmed the wood ants at Burnham Beeches for a two-week period for a major new series for the BBC about British wildlife due to be screened in 2023.
48. Two more days filming for an Agatha Christie drama are booked for early July.

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