

Committee(s)	Dated: 13 September 2021
Committee name – Epping Forest & Commons Committee	
Subject: Superintendent’s update ‘The Commons’	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. The team continue to liaise with Buckinghamshire Council (BC) 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. The temporary suspensions ended at the start of August and

cannot be extended. Buckinghamshire Council officers have recently amended the proposals following the public consultation and approval is awaited at which point more details will be published.

2. The cafe at Burnham Beeches has remained very popular. All the areas of closed outdoor seating have been made available again.
3. 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 and bracken whipping. Individual volunteers have continued the on-going monitoring programme.
4. Practical group volunteers have had a summer break in August and when they return in September group sizes will be returning to more normal levels for the first time in 18 months. Weekend tasks will still be limited due to low staffing levels and available cover as a result of 3 (33%) of the Ranger team staff leaving, retiring and new recruits not yet being in place.
5. The Eco-volunteer Group have continued to be active over the summer completing a survey of Stoke Common for the Bog Bush Cricket with a local entomologist. They surpassed expectations with over 50 being found, over a much wider area than the previous survey in 2009 highlighting the improvement of the habitat for them as a result of the heathland restoration. None were found in Burnham Beeches. They have also started a veteran tree survey of land adjacent to Burnham Beeches.
6. The Ranger team have been ensuring the Beeches is grazed using cattle (in both traditional and invisible fence) and ponies. Ponies will be moving to the northern section of Stoke Common in September.
7. Rangers have completed the necessary surveys for Oak Processionary Moth (OPM) at Stoke Common and overseen removal of nests by contractors in July. Stoke Common is in the national OPM control zone as a result of six nests being found last year. The final total of nests found and removed in 2021 was 62 nests and these were cleared over 5 days.
8. Plans for winter habitat restoration work programmes at the Beeches and Stoke Common have been confirmed and orders placed with contractors where required – for example including work on Stoke Common firebreaks commencing in September. The ancient pollard restoration work programme at Burnham Beeches has also been confirmed for winter 2021/22 and contractor and mobile elevated work platform hire plans put in place.

9. The Ranger team have also been supervising and liaising with several film productions during July and August for shoots during those months and later in the year.
10. Interviews for an apprentice (Ranger) based at the Burnham Beeches Estate Office have taken place and a suitable candidate has been selected.
11. Fieldwork continue the review of the National Vegetation Classification of Burnham Beeches assisted by a volunteer botanist. Several rare plant species have been found to be increasing in abundance and some species of liverwort have been added that are new to the Beeches and identified as a result of this work.
12. The Conservation Officer and volunteer botanist also repeated a vegetation transect first carried out in 1959 by two students. The details of what they did and where were so detailed that the exact locations could be found, enabling comparisons of the vegetation over time.
13. The Conservation Officer and Superintendent attended a meeting in Farnham Common regarding problems with the village sewers overflowing and resulting in sporadic pollution events in the Nile stream flowing into Burnham Beeches. Members from the County Council, together with the local MP and residents of affected properties asked Thames Water to resolve the problem asap but there is clearly no quick fix. Future meetings are planned and there may be possibilities to improve the fresh water flow through the Beeches as a result of remedial works.
14. The Keeper of Natural History at Aylesbury Museum visited the small quarry within Burnham Beeches for some geological samples for a new permanent exhibition due to open in the autumn.
15. A visit of four arborists from Spain was hosted to look at the veteran tree management.

PARTNERSHIPS

Kenley Revival update

16. Work is progressing well to rectify the thaumasite affected conservation work. A new central spine has been constructed in the Tribute Fighter Pen using resilient Northcot bricks and sulphate resistant Aalborg cement. Despite some issues with the supply of bricks, the 12-week programme of work costing £161,000 is currently on course to finish by mid-September

17. The signage supplier visited the site to view vandalism and other maintenance issues, to the signs and subsequently devised a solution to repair and strengthen the tabletop signs and a broken small wing sign. Currently we are awaiting a detailed schedule and timetable for this work.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

18. Interviews for an apprentice (Ranger) based at the Merlewood Estate Office have taken place and a suitable candidate has been selected.
19. The Assistant Ranger for the Coulsdon Commons has since left the team following the end of her contract.
20. Volunteers from the Croydon U3A have been assisting the Coulsdon Ranger to re-survey the grassland compartments on Coulsdon Common and the National Vegetation Classification of habitats.
21. A new information panel has been installed in the Windmill Paddock on Coulsdon Common. The sign focuses on the former windmills located on the Common, the Caterham Barracks and wildlife that can be seen today.
22. Green Flag and Heritage Award judges were accompanied by Rangers on a guided site tour of Farthing Downs and Coulsdon Common. This was the first time Coulsdon Common was entered for the Green Heritage Award. The remaining Commons were visited by a judge during a mystery shop for the award.
23. Draft Management Plans for Farthing Downs, Coulsdon Common, Riddlesdown and Kenley Common have now been drawn up covering the 2021-2031 management period. The plans have been sent to the local consultative committees for review and comment.
24. Public consultations for the Kenley and Coulsdon Common 2021-2031 Management Plans have been completed. A total number of 321 people responded to the main actions of both plans via the Google Forms survey online. The responses were overwhelmingly positive towards the proposed actions.
25. Monthly moth surveys have been carried out by light trapping on Farthing Downs and Coulsdon Common. A portable light trap has been loaned from the London Wildlife Trust and will be used to survey the Riddlesdown Quarry. Moth surveys have solely focused on Farthing Downs and Coulsdon Common due to the need for a power source to supply the traps, so use of the portable trap will enable a greater coverage.

26. Members of the Croydon U3A attended a morning moth workshop on Farthing Downs in August led by the Rangers where they were shown how to survey and a selection of species.
27. Annual hay cutting has started across grassland areas on the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons. The cut has been later than previous years due to the poor weather in July and early August limiting opportunities for cutting, airing and bailing.
28. Volunteers have been busy supporting the Rangers to pull ragwort from the grassland areas across the Coulsdon Commons. The phenomenal growth of ragwort this year combined with several staff members self-isolating has meant that areas due to be cut for hay were prioritised.
29. Two Duke of Edinburgh Award students have been litter picking set routes on Coulsdon Common as part of their volunteering element of the scheme. A growing number of volunteers have requested to help litter pick across the site and other Commons. A community litter pick has been planned for Farthing Downs in the autumn.
30. A section of stock fencing on Tollers field on New Hill has been replaced by Rangers.
31. Rangers have been carrying out bracken control on areas of West Wickham Common and Coulsdon Common. Alongside regular mowing of paths across the Commons, volunteers have been assisting Rangers with clearing Rights of Way and cutting back overhanging vegetation.
32. Rangers have continued with reviewing the progression of ash dieback on New Hill. Areas of inflicted ash around high-use footpaths and bridleways have been selected for removal for visitor safety.
33. The Rangers have been ensuring the Commons are grazed by the Sussex cattle and Jacob sheep. This has included daily routine welfare checks and rotating the livestock so that the grasslands are appropriately managed and that there is enough food.
34. The main herd of Sussex cattle on Farthing Downs were gathered and checked by a vet to see which cows were successfully in calf. A total of 21 out of 26 cows are pregnant.
35. One of the Sussex cattle aborted their calf. It is strongly suspected that this was caused by neosporosis and a test from the vet has been requested to see if this is the case with the cow.

36. Round-headed rampion, a nationally scarce wildflower, has been recorded in greater numbers on 8-Acre and found for the first time in the fields adjacent to the Farthing Downs car park. Its presence on the site reflects the wider distribution of the plant into the North Downs seen in the last few years.

Ashtead Common

37. Volunteers are back following their usual summer break. Numbers are back to pre-covid levels, although some covid controls remain in place.
38. Oak Processionary Moth has again behaved atypically. After a suppressed start due to cold weather in spring and early summer the infestation showed signs of taking hold in July. Contractors removed high-risk nests such as those at low level and near entrances. However, latterly during the summer the caterpillars again appeared to be suppressed, possibly by conditions or the parasitic fly.
39. Ashtead Common's apprentice completed the 18-month (with two additional months added) placement in July having gained enough experience to obtain a level two certificate in Environmental Conservation.

Support Services Team (SST)

40. The Support Services Team attended a virtual presentation relating to 'enabling services' hosted by some of the new Executive Team and now await the outcomes from the Chief Operating Officer.
41. The team continue to busy and have, additionally, been assisting with the operations team because of negative impact on numbers within the team due to Covid infections.

Incidents

Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common

42. There were just 10 incidents in the period. These included 2 of fly tipping, 2 of site vandalism/misuse, 2 dog related incidents - 1 person received a formal PSPO warning. The rest were a variety of occasions when visitors needed assistance including the Rangers helping emergency services with a successful search for an elderly woman with dementia and supporting with road traffic accidents on external roads.

Ashtead Common

43. A potential pollution incident affecting the Rye Brook at the Two Bridges outfall was reported to the Environment Agency and Thames Water on 11 August,

however, by the time contractors working for Thames Water attended site the water was running clear again.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

44. There were 17 incidents within the period from 25 June to 25 August.
45. The Farthing Downs car park gate was badly damaged late in the evening of 17 July by a group of 4 vehicles and reported to the Met Police.
46. Four incidents were related to cows out of their paddock, visitor concern over a cow, a cow that had subsequently aborted and an incident of a lamb getting stuck in a fence.
47. A small tree limb fell onto a property adjoining Coulsdon Common on 30 July. A tree surgeon has carried out remedial pruning to ensure the remainder of the tree is safe.
48. Three incidents were of fly tipping and vandalism to signs, benches and noticeboards. Two incidents included activations of the fire alarm at the Merlewood Office and the remaining were a variety of cars being locked in the Riddlesdown car park, illegal ATVs being ridden on Farthing Downs and an access gate onto Kenley Common being blocked by a caravan and transit.

Filming, major events and other activities

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

57. A short commercial was filmed on Farthing Downs making use of the car park and Ditches Lane for one day in August.

Burnham Beeches

49. Silverback productions returned in August for 1 day of drone filming in relation to a piece on the wood ants at Burnham Beeches for a major new series for the BBC about British wildlife due to be screened in 2023.
50. A total of 3 days filming for an Agatha Christie drama were undertaken in two visits during for July and August
51. A major Netflix production will be filming for 3/4 days at the end of August and early September.

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