

Committee(s)	Dated: 9 May 2022
Committee name – Epping Forest & Commons Committee	
Subject: Assistant Director's update for The Commons including annual report of PSPO incidents.	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?	NO
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 N/A
Report of Juliemma McLoughlin, Executive Director Environment	For Information
Report author: Andy Barnard, Assistant Director, The Commons, Environment Department	

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. In the early part of the reporting period the volunteer groups continued with scrub clearance targeting the north common (Stoke Common) and around Sir Henry Peeks Drive and the Stag car park (Burnham Beeches). They have also cleared scrub and small trees from the southern edge of Middle Pond and continued with wood pasture restoration. More recently work has shifted to the summer work programme of site maintenance – including path repair works, installation of earth bunds to protect areas from vehicles and creation of a wildlife garden at the information point and café.

2. The Eco-volunteer Group has been carrying out fieldwork to evaluate the impact of deer and livestock browsing on the woody plants in the Beeches. While doing this they are also recording the amount of trampling pressure by visitors in the plots.
3. The annual reptile survey has started at Stoke Common. Co-ordinated by staff this relies on substantial volunteer hours to check all the sheets regularly during the survey period of April – May.
4. The ponies have finished grazing the west area of Stoke Common and are now grazing off site at their winter quarters at Teikyo School. The farrier has trimmed their feet and they have had their annual flu injections. The cattle from the Beeches are still in their winter quarters. Fence inspections have started, ready for the livestock to return to the Beeches later in the spring.
5. The big winter project this year was the veteran tree work. Burnham Beeches staff were assisted by contractors and the Hampstead Heath tree team. In total they did ground clearance of around 18 trees, high clearance around 19 and 59 were cut. Cutting and high clearance involves a mixture of techniques, climbing, use of an access platform or cutting with a pole saw from the ground.
6. In addition to the above, two areas of wood pasture restoration were completed by staff. 75 young pollard trees were cut on rotation for the 2nd or 3rd time and volunteers and contractors carried out fencing repair work ahead of the grazing season along with testing of invisible fences.
7. Extensive work has been carried out on the tree safety programme following inspections, ensuring that trees along highways and areas where visitors congregate are safe. The aftermath of storm Eunice also required additional work. While a sizeable number of trees were brought down by the storm, none of the veteran pollards were affected.
8. The replacement of the outflow to Middle Pond has been completed by engineering contractors. The leak in the dam has been mended by removing old pipework within the dam wall and the failing concrete at the outflow replaced by clay and special interlocking bricks. The pipe carrying water through the dam to the new outflow was also replaced. This work was funded as an additional project by the City Surveyor costing approximately £130,000.
9. The apprentice has been attending college and has also started preparing for a major overhaul of site boardwalks this summer by ordering materials and planning works. He is also carrying out a systematic survey of the reptiles in Burnham Beeches.

10. As part of the ongoing partnership with The Beacons of the Past Heritage Lottery Fund project a second public archaeological excavation of one of the woodland banks in the Beeches has started. The location this time is in the Egypt wood area and we hope to establish the age of the bank and its connection to Sevenways Plain Hillfort. The hillforts project has also commissioned some virtual reality interpretation and mini management plans for the hillfort and other historic features in the Beeches. Finally, a public open day and iron age event was held at the end of April to highlight the importance of the hillfort and interpret it and the lives of the people who lived there to visitors.
11. A PhD student from Reading University sieved buckets of gravel from the quarry in Burnham Beeches looking for signs of early man in the Thames valley. She was delighted to find worked neolithic flint.
12. A survey of the bog moss species in Burnham Beeches was carried out, partly as a training session for volunteers and staff. 12 species were recorded, and one, found last summer, was confirmed as present, the first record for over 40 years. The rarest species, *Sphagnum medium*, was found in several locations and is thriving.
13. The results from a survey of the true bugs on Stoke Common last year have been received. The entomologist recorded 283 species, the highest he has ever found in an equivalent two-day survey. Several scarce and threatened species were found including a rare weevil and the small chocolate tip moth. The most important habitats were found to be the 'draw down' zones of the ponds and areas of young birch scrub. Our management to encourage a mosaic of habitats seems to be ideal for most of the species recorded.
14. All the reports have been received from the biodiversity survey work carried out on neighbouring land as part of the landscape scale project. The final 'synthesis' report is being prepared by Plantlife.
15. Events have included a half term trail and an Easter trail, with easter egg prizes for completion. The latter was so popular fresh supplies of eggs had to be found after the first weekend! A 2hr afternoon drop-in session with one of the rangers talking about reptiles & amphibians was popular too, with 150 people attending and raising approximately £450 to support the annual work programme.
16. A meeting concerning the impact of potential recreation impacts from a big development in Slough was attended. Hosted by Natural England, Slough Borough Council agreed to upgrade one of the larger parks in the Borough to

Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) status, but we are still awaiting more details and plans.

PARTNERSHIPS

Kenley Revival update

17. The project has now finished and signed off by Lottery Heritage Fund. A Gateway 6 completion report is being prepared for consideration by this committee in July.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

18. The Sussex cows have been turned out of the barn at Merlewood and are now grazing the Woodplace Farm Fields on Farthing Downs. It was a successful year for calving with 17 new calves born between early January and April. After identifying a deficiency in their diet that caused abnormalities in calving last year, slow-release boluses were given to the cows which eliminated any problems this year.
19. Lambing has started with three sets of twins already born since 16 April. This is expected to last for a few weeks and rangers have been carrying out regular checks throughout the day and night. Once born, the ewes and lambs will be kept in secure paddocks until they can safely graze the Commons without risk of dog attacks.
20. A new Sussex bull has been purchased from the local Titsey Estate in Warlingham to continue the breeding programme and to ensure the right temperament and characteristics in the herd are retained. Since early April, the bull has been running with the cows in the Woodplace Farm fields on Farthing Downs.
21. After a 2-year hiatus due to Coronavirus restrictions on public events, we held our popular 'Meet the Calves' event in April at the Merlewood Estate Yard. This is usually the first chance for members of the public to see the newborn calves and provided us with a chance to share information about the benefits of conservation grazing. Over 150 people attended the 3-hour open house event. Continuing with tradition, we held a competition to name the bull, with Ferdinand being the most popular choice amongst staff.
22. New stock-proof fencing has been installed to extend the grazing compartment along Whyteleafe Bank at Kenley Common. Volunteers and rangers carried out extensive scrub removal in this area several years ago. This will now be grazed to improve the diversity of wildflowers and expand what is one of the best examples of chalk grassland habitat in the local area.

23. We have been trialling a project on Farthing Downs to help protect threatened skylarks. Skylark populations have rapidly declined in the past decade and there are now only a handful of sites with breeding populations in South London. Temporary electric fencing has been put in place along an area of the Farthing Downs ridge to prevent disturbance from dogs and other human activities during the nesting season between March and September. The project has helped to raise awareness about skylark and other ground nesting birds. Rangers and volunteers have been closely monitoring skylark activity around the area to identify if this is having an impact on nesting behaviour.
24. The small herd of heifers that have been grazing multiple sites throughout the winter have been continuing to use the NoFence collars. This has allowed us to target and refine grazing in the areas where it is most needed including sections of thicker vegetation on Farthing Downs and areas recently cleared on Bunker Bank, Kenley Common to help reduce scrub growth and remove excess nutrients.
25. Volunteers have been assisting rangers across the Coulsdon and West Wickham Commons including actions to remove encroaching scrub on Hilltop, Kenley Common for the benefit of chalk grassland wildflowers as well as hedge laying at Spring Park and Farthing Downs. Riddlesdown volunteers have been making use of material from winter coppicing to produce charcoal. Volunteers on Coulsdon Common have been continuing with hazel coppicing.
26. After Storm Eunice and multiple storms that followed in short succession during February and March, the rangers have been dealing with extensive damage to the stock of trees across the Commons. Contractors were brought in to remove or reduce dangerous trees following safety checks across high and medium risk areas. Despite the damage, there were far fewer trees brought down than might have been expected suggesting that the routine tree safety checks and subsequent work carried out is having a positive effect.
27. There are events planned throughout spring and summer focusing on ecology, heritage and livestock including popular bat, bird and wildflower walks. These events will be linked to a wider 'Festival of National Nature Reserves' held between May and October and led by Natural England to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the first designated reserve in the country.
28. The Commons Twitter profile has reached a milestone 2000 followers, the majority of which were gained during lockdown. There is a strong presence of regular posters sharing their photos of the Commons and local wildlife.
29. There has been a marked decrease in the number of incidents of anti-social behaviour requiring a response from the rangers and affecting local residents

and visitors. Similarly, the changes made to the car parks has reduced the number of cars being locked in overnight and emergency callouts for rangers working late shifts or on call.

30. The Jacob sheep have been grazing a small area close to Riddlesdown owned and managed by the London Wildlife Trust as part of a long-term ambition to reduce dense-growing dog wood and improve conditions for invertebrates in a chalk-grassland glade. A small ceremony marked the first time the site had been grazed in its 23-year history. As well as loaning the sheep for a brief time, rangers have been providing advice on stock-proof fencing, establishing a route to the isolated glade, and finding ways to connect habitats between the two landowners.
31. A new residential tenant has occupied 90 Kenley Lane and Farthing Downs Barn is now occupied as a business let. Income from both properties forms part of our annual income targets subsequent to the recent budget cuts.

Ashtead Common

32. Payment rates for Countryside Stewardship were adjusted in Ashtead Common's favour between the point of application and the start of the scheme. This means that the grant award is potentially worth up to £30,000 a year, rather than the £20,000 originally anticipated.
33. The winter work programme was completed successfully, including crown work on 31 ancient oaks, scrub management and tree safety tasks.
34. The Common recorded over 6,000 hours of volunteer involvement; a pre-covid level of voluntary contributions.
35. One member of the team has been off work since Christmas, and because Ashtead has a very small team, this has put pressure on the remaining members of staff. However, authority has been given to appoint another apprentice and the TOM Phase 1 process has created a new Assistant Ranger post. Both will be recruited as soon as possible.

Incidents

Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common

36. There were 17 incidents during the period. These included five fly tipping related incidents. Four of these were relatively small-scale household dumping, the fifth was the remains of a cannabis farm and material was collected by the police. The rest were a mix of vandalism (x3), dog and general site misuse related.

Ashtead Common

37. A runner fell in January and needed first aid and transport from site. Rangers assisted.
38. Two incidents occurred on April 21. Rangers were investigating a sewerage spill in the Howards Wood area of Ashtead Common when an incident occurred nearby at Lady Howards (railway) Crossing. A woman was hit by a train and sadly died at the scene. Rangers assisted access for the emergency services.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

39. There were 4 incidents during the period. These included an abandoned pony found on Coulsdon Common, a dog chasing sheep and a small bonfire found by the roadside on Farthing Downs
40. A van parked overnight had caused damage to the car park barrier at Farthing Downs. The damage was rectified by the owner of the vehicle thanks to the ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) system.

Filming, major events and other activities.

Burnham Beeches

41. A large Disney film has started setting up in Burnham Beeches ready for filming in a few weeks' time.

Annual report of activity in relation to Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPO) at Burnham Beeches.

42. The existing 5 PSPOs made in 2017 were extended, following all necessary public consultation and the decision of this Committee in September 2020, for a further 3 years in December 2020. The result of the consultation is summarised below.

Order 1 - 100% support to extend the PSPO for a further three years

Order 2 – 94% support to extend the PSPO for a further three years

Order 3 – 100% support to extend the PSPO for a further three years

Order 4 - 100% support to extend the PSPO for a further three years

Order 5 – 100% support to extend the PSPO for a further three years

43. Table 1 below shows annualised PSPO (and previous Dog Control Order) incidents dealt with at Burnham Beeches since 2015/16.

Table 1

Incidents detail	15/ 16	16/ 17	17/ 18	18/ 19	19/ 20	20/ 21	2021/ 22
Order 1 - Fouling	11	11	7	7	3	7	7
Order 2 - Dogs off lead in the on-lead area	453	329	285	264	213	524	286

Order 3 - Dogs not under effective control in the off-lead area	46	30	27	16	19	27	16
Order 4 - Dogs taken into the dog free area	4	16	15	1	7	1	9
Order 5 - More than 4 dogs/person	3	0	0	2	1	1	0
Total DCO/PSPO incidents	517	386	334	290	243	560	318
Number of incidents resulting in a formal report/investigation	8	15	15	16	14	16	8
Number of formal written warnings issued	2	8	9	10	10	7	3
Number of FPN issued	0	0	0	4	0	1	1
Number of prosecutions	0	0*	1*	0	1**	0	0

Incident occurred in 16/17 – prosecution through magistrate court 2017/18

** Incident occurred in 18/19 prosecution through magistrate court 2019/20

2019/20 visitor numbers estimate - approximately 488000 people visits/annum

2021/22 visitor numbers estimate – approximately 805,000 – 1,019000

44. Following the remarkably high visitor levels in 2020/21 – visitor numbers began to return to more normal levels from the end of April 2021 as covid restrictions were progressively eased, though remained higher than average at times
45. Until 2020/21 there had been a steady decrease in the total number of PSPO incidents dealt with, year on year. In 2021/22 that general pattern of positive decline has returned in many areas. The exceptions were the number of incidents of dogs being walked off lead in the on-lead area, and those taken into the small dog free area at the cafe –though in this latter case numbers are still small. Whilst the number of dogs off lead in the on-lead area was much lower than in 2020/21 it is still higher than 2019/20. This higher level of dogs off lead in the early part of the year was undoubtedly caused higher levels of new visitors not familiar with the National Nature Reserve.
46. The number of incidents requiring a more formal report/investigation in 2021/22 was at it joint lowest (8) and just one Fixed Penalty Notice was issued and paid.
47. The approved PSPO and preceding DCO enforcement protocols made it clear that when enforcing the Orders, the City will not take a zero-tolerance approach to DCO/PSPO breaches. This means that in many incidents the person concerned is asked to put the matter right, clean up after their dog, put it on lead, remove it from the dog free area, and if they comply no further action is taken beyond logging of the incident detail. As a result, most incidents dealt with require no more than visitors being given information and or guidance by the Ranger team. However, where a breach is by someone who is well aware of the rules, a repeat offender, or where the person is unable or unwilling to put the

matter right these will result in more formal investigation and action including final written warning and or FPN/ prosecution.

48. The figures this year, reflect that most breaches of the PSPO were not deliberate or repeat offences and were simply dealt with my explanation and information by the Ranger team.

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