

Committee(s)	Dated: 11 July 2022
Committee name – Epping Forest & Commons Committee	
Subject: Assistant Director's update for The Commons.	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. The volunteers have been busy at both Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common carrying out a range of tasks in support of the summer work programmes. These have included path repair works, site maintenance work such as sign board installation and fence repairs, summer bracken 'bashing' to stop it from getting too dense and competing with the veteran trees and, moving the electric fences for the cows on the main common. Specific projects included

the installation of earth bunds to protect areas from vehicles and the creation of a wildlife garden at the information point and café.

2. The annual reptile survey at Stoke Common was completed at the end of May in total 15 volunteers visited the common 98 times, April to May, to check 10 survey areas and contributing over 140 hours of survey effort and providing information allowing us to monitor the spread of key species across the common following restoration works.
3. Volunteers also helped to replace an old wooden boardwalk that was starting to fall apart, with a brand new all recycled plastic version. Individual volunteers helped the Ranger team over the course of a week to break up and remove the old boardwalk and install the new and we couldn't have done it so quickly without them.
4. The ponies are back in the Beeches, along with four cattle they are grazing within the 43ha fenced area which includes the heathland and mire as well as wood pasture. The other four cows have been munching the long grass of the Main Common within an 'old fashioned' electric fence which has been moved so that they have grazed it in three sections. They are currently in the most prominent position right opposite the car parks and closest to the café. So far we have had lots of positive comments from visitors. The cows will have moved to the invisible fence enclosures by the time of this committee meeting.
5. The annual grey squirrel control is underway in the areas with the old and young pollards, this project takes up a significant amount of ranger time but is essential in enabling the trees to grow after cutting.
6. Oak processionary moth (OPM) nest surveying has started on Stoke Common, staff time being augmented by some volunteer surveyors. As expected, as this is just the third year of OPM being found at Stoke Common, the number of nests being found is still increasing, along with costs of their removal.
7. Disney Productions have completed filming at the Beeches and the income has exceeded this year's financial target. The replacement of an old tractor and other aging equipment is now possible.
8. The Eco-volunteer Group has been assisting with the annual vegetation monitoring and has also been searching for some specific invertebrate species not seen for several years using a variety of methods.
9. The rare fungus *Meruliporia pulverulenta* has been identified from Burnham Beeches. It is a summer fruiting species of hollow oak trees known in the UK from only a few places, also including Epping Forest, Blenheim and Windsor

Great Park. Work being carried out on the central grant given to the Bucks Fungus Group is progressing well with two new species to science being confirmed from Burnham Beeches via DNA analysis, the next step is to write the formal descriptions. Leaves were collected from eight 'crab' apple trees in Burnham Beeches for genetic testing as part of the central grant funded project coordinated by Orchard Network. Six window traps and six subterranean pitfall traps have been installed for the summer as part of a saproxylic survey. The last serious survey in the Beeches was over 25 years ago using older collecting techniques so this work aims to provide an update and include examining some of the older oak trees. The surveyor is also doing some hand searching.

10. The apprentice has finished all his required college attendance and has played a key role in the boardwalk replacement above. His reptile survey of the Beeches showed that reptiles have expanded into a relatively newly cleared area on the mire.
11. The public archaeological excavation of a woodbank organised by the Beacons of the Past Heritage Lottery Fund has been completed. While nothing of significance was found it seems highly likely that the bank is an extension of that excavated a few years ago which extends out from Sevenways Plain Hillfort but was apparently constructed some time later. The 'Iron Age' public open day was well attended with demonstrations of iron smelting and displays about apothecary and pigments.
12. Events during the period included a Jubilee trail, themed to highlight historical connections between the Beeches and the Monarchy. This included the tree designated for the Queen's Golden Jubilee and information about the designation of the whole area as part of the Queen's Green Canopy this year. A second 'meet the Ranger' themed on reptiles was also popular.
13. Air quality monitoring points have been set up with the Burnham Beeches SAC using s106 funding from SSE who are redeveloping Slough Power Station. Ammonia and nitrogen dioxide will be monitored for a year at six locations, including one up in the tree canopy to compare air quality at different levels above ground in the area where the most interesting lichens have been found in the Beeches recently. Once the year has been completed the funding will pay for a report, which will bring in results of other studies too, including that from the National ammonia network which already has one monitoring point in the Beeches.

14. The carrying capacity study relating to Burnham Beeches, funded using Bucks mitigation funding, has been completed. The concept of establishing a carrying capacity for a variety of different aspects of the Beeches was explored, for example, trees, vegetation, ground nesting birds, historic environment and visitor experience. Fixing a precise figure for the number of visitors that the Beeches can support is impossible for most of the topics studied but the report provides evidence for use in an Access Strategy which is the next phase of the work.
15. A meeting was held with Summerleaze Ltd. and Natural England to discuss the future management of the quarry site which is coming to the end of its working life. Options discussed included supporting Burnham Beeches through a SANG or via biodiversity net gain. Discussions are continuing since the meeting.
16. Several housing developments are on hold within the Slough Borough Council area while mitigation to protect Burnham Beeches from the impact of recreational pressure is being agreed, several options are still being considered.

PARTNERSHIPS

Kenley Revival update

17. The project has now finished and a Gateway 6 completion report is being prepared for consideration by this committee in September.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

18. The Sussex cattle have been continuing with seasonal conservation grazing across the Coulsdon Commons as part of Countryside Stewardship. The main herd of 44 calves and cows have been moved to Farthing Downs whilst smaller herds are grazing grassland compartments on the remaining sites.
19. Lambing was a success with 17 new lambs added to the flock of Jacob sheep. The lambs and ewes, which are still vulnerable to dogs, will be kept in a secure paddock to graze before moving to open fields in the coming months. Lambing was reintroduced last year for the first time since 2012.
20. A new pond has been created in an enclosed area adjacent to the railway cutting on Riddlesdown to increase aquatic habitat for birds, invertebrates and reptiles. The area surrounding the pond has been planted with a mixture of native shrubs

and trees in addition to an existing hibernaculum for common lizards and amphibians.

21. Permanent fencing has been erected around two exposed WWII anti-aircraft gun emplacements located on Kenley Common so that they can be viewed more easily and safely. These would have been part of the ground defences in place to protect the airfield during significant fighting that took place at this key Battle of Britain fighter station. These were first uncovered during the Kenley Revival Archaeological dig in 2017. Signage will now be designed and installed, informing visitors of these important aviation heritage features.
22. Staff from Network Rail helped rangers to remove young hawthorn samplings using hand-held 'tree poppers' from the chalk grassland on Hilltop, Kenley Common as part of a team corporate volunteering day. Removing the young hawthorn using these devices helps to control dense growing scrub in a sustainable way that would otherwise require the application of herbicides or coppicing. The field where the visiting volunteers were working has undergone extensive scrub control to help chalk grassland plants flourish. Several species of orchid have now been seen including bee, pyramidal and man orchid.
23. The skylark trial plot on Farthing Downs has prompted positive reaction from the local community and visitors. The trial, which includes a large, fenced plot to minimise disturbance from dogs and predators to these ground-nesting birds, will run until the end of the skylark breeding period in August. Several skylarks have been observed in the fenced area.
24. Sections of path at Spring Park that were heavily afflicted by winter rain, mud and erosion have been repaired and resurfaced. The new path will limit the damage to the surrounding woodland where desire lines have appeared throughout the winter.
25. A large chalk bund has been installed in the overflow car park on Farthing Downs as a solution to reduce dangerous driving and anti-social behaviour. The bund runs down the centre of the car park, thus reducing the speed of drivers. Seed will be collected from the upcoming hay cut and spread onto the bund to help wildflowers and local grasses to establish.
26. Volunteers have been assisting rangers across the Coulsdon and West Wickham Commons including actions to remove mares tail and bull rush in the pond at Spring Park, as well as cutting back vegetation along Rights of Way on Farthing Downs, Coulsdon Common and Kenley Common. Riddlesdown volunteers have been helping the Ranger with new fencing to expand the grazing area on Famet to increase the diversity of wildflower species found on this key area of chalk grassland.

27. Through a series of free spring and summer events focussing on conservation, heritage and landscape the rangers have directly engaged with 287 people. Events have included wildflower, evening bat and wildlife at dusk walks as well as community clean-ups, dawn chorus walks and heritage tours across the Commons. These events have been extremely popular with many becoming fully booked within 1-2 days of publishing them.

Ashtead Common

28. Interviews were held for the newly created Assistant Ranger post on June 17. Ashtead's former Apprentice was successful and is due to start in the role imminently.
29. The Birch/Aspen Grazing Area was extended by 3.1ha to create a total area of 8.85ha. This aligns with the management plan objective to expand grazing by 23.6ha over the whole common. When complete 51.37ha of Ashtead Common will be grazed. 10 Belted Galloway cattle supplied by Surrey Wildlife Trust arrived in May.
30. Oak Processionary Moth (OPM) appears to be much less prevalent than previous years. Research undertaken at neighbouring Epsom Common suggests that over 50% of OPM nests now contain a parasitic fly. This together with other forms of predation appear to be controlling numbers.
31. Ashtead Common Consultative Group met on May 25 to discuss items such as grazing expansion, the Climate Action Strategy, ecological surveying and the annual work programme.

Incidents

Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common

32. There were 13 incidents during the period. These included :- four related to BBQs, one fly tipping, one x Public Spaces Protection Order incident requiring a formal warning letter and another dog walker was written to about keeping dogs under effective control. The remainder were a mixture of fly- tipping, one car break-in, injured wildlife and rangers helping a visitor who fell whilst walking in the Beeches and required an ambulance.

Ashtead Common

33. Six incidents were reported during this period. These included a barbeque, two incidents of graffiti, anti-social behaviour, damage to an electric fence and a minor road traffic collision.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

34. There were 9 incidents during the period. These included 2 that related to graffiti being sprayed on infrastructure, 1 incident of vandalism where several 20mph signs were removed along the roadside of Farthing Downs and 2 incidents of fly tipping where one of these included dumped cannabis farm equipment.
35. Two incidents required medical attention from paramedics after a rider fell from her horse on Farthing Downs and a woman potentially broke her hip after a fall on Kenley Common.
36. A car parked in the Riddlesdown car park was observed with covered number plates to bypass the ANPR system in place there.
37. One incident related to an unprovoked dog attack on small dog on Kenley Common.

Filming, major events and other activities

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

Burnham Beeches

38. A large Disney film has been using Burnham Beeches as location. This was due to be finished and the unit gone from site by the end of May. However, a combination of poor weather on actual shoot days at the end of May, followed by covid issues and subsequent actor availability meant the shoot didn't actually leave until the third week of June. The bulk of the time the shoot was on site was preparation work and standby with only a relatively low number of actual filming days. However, as with all such shoots they are required to implement a range of controls to ensure no damage occurs to the Beeches and the Ranger team monitors activity very closely. Although income from filming is necessary and very welcome the additional three weeks of activity on site was not particularly helpful for other work programmes.

Ashtead Common

39. Two guided walks held to celebrate Ashtead Common's designation as a Queens Green Canopy woodland were well attended.
40. Ashtead's Village Day returned after a two-year covid absence and the common had a stall promoting the new management plan.

Report author Andy Barnard,
Assistant Director, The Commons, Environment Department
E: andy.barnard@cityoflondon.gov.uk
T: 01753 647358