

Committee(s)	Dated: 12 September 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 kept as busy as ever 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, and fence repairs, summer bracken 'bashing' to stop it from getting too dense and competing with the veteran trees, mulching around trees and moving the electric fences for the cows on the Main Common.

2. Volunteers also helped to replace a 150m long old wooden boardwalk that was starting to fall apart. Work was split into two halves with the first section of 74 metres fully replaced between the 11th on the 19th of July. The second half of the works took place in the first week of August and was completed in just five days. This was a fantastic effort by the team and the volunteers. The location of the boardwalk is in a very sensitive area meaning all the work must be undertaken by hand, firstly by dismantling and removing all the old wood, sorting and de-nailing it for recycling and then setting out all the new bearers and installing the new top boards, grip strips and toe boards. The new boardwalk is receiving very positive feedback from visitors and will continue to provide an important route for visitors across fragile areas of the Beeches that would otherwise be damaged by the heavy footfall. Volunteers contributed over 200 hours of volunteer effort on top of the 150 hours from the ranger team to help us complete this work.
3. Volunteers have also been helping us by regularly updating displays at the information point throughout the summer, and undertaking bat transects as part of the national bat monitoring programme at both Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common.
4. The eco-volunteer group has completed all the annual vegetation monitoring and has also surveyed for dragonflies and clear-wing moths. During the vegetation monitoring a new toadstool for the country was found, a dark red waxcap, *Hydrocele coccineocrenata*. The eco-volunteers have just completed an inventory of all the junipers within Burnham Beeches. These now total over 250, a fantastic increase from just 16 surviving thirty years ago; there are many small plants, seedlings from the older bushes. The eco vols are also helping collect data on crab apples for a project that has central City of London grant funding.
5. With the extreme heat of July and August staff have been on high alert for fires and ensuring that the existing ban on fires and BBQs is being observed by visitors. On the very hottest days visitors clearly heeded national advice to stay at home and both Stoke Common and Burnham Beeches were noticeably quiet on the 18 and 19th of July. However, the prolonged drought and extreme heat is having a real impact on the trees many of which are losing leaves or are developing early autumn colour. Initially, the old trees were faring quite well, but in the last few weeks they are also starting to suffer. The grass in the open grassland and wood pasture areas is brown, providing little grazing for the livestock. Even the normally wet mire areas are dry and rutted. There is little to be done to mitigate this situation albeit if the drought worsens consideration may be given to watering selected veteran trees if regulations allow.
6. The ponies and four cattle have been grazing within the 43ha fenced area including the heathland and mire as well as wood pasture. The other cattle have ben grazing within invisible fences since June and will soon be moved to new areas. This includes some cows going off site for a short while to graze in

partnership with a local parish council - this will also hopefully help our available grazing last longer and allow some time for training in Nofence.

7. The biennial survey of all the old, pollarded trees at Burnham Beeches has been carried out this summer highlighting any emergency work required to protect the trees. Due to the hot dry summer, it is very likely that only emergency pruning will be carried out this winter. Further tree safety work has also been carried out.
8. Following the survey for oak processionary moth at Stoke Common, over 130 trees have been found with a total of 241 nests. This is an expected increase from the 90 or so nests found in 2021. All nests have now been removed by contractors working on our behalf.
9. Staff from Oxford Archaeology have been surveying the two scheduled monuments within Burnham Beeches. Funded by the 'Hillforts, Beacons of the Past' Heritage lottery Fund, they will be producing a management plan for each monument and providing solutions to prevent future erosion.
10. Three popular public events have been held, 'Creatures of the Night,' 'On Location' and 'Plants of Burnham Beeches'. The 'Woodland Wonders Trail' has been operating during school holidays with many families taking part.
11. Both sites received the Green Flag Award as well as the Green Heritage Award after judges carried out a mystery shop of each site. This marks the 17th year of Green Flag Awards for these sites.

Kenley Revival update

12. The Corporate Property and Project sub-Committee received a Gateway 6 report at their July meeting and resolved to close the Kenley Revival Project.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

13. Rangers have been carrying out summer tasks including repairing and replacing livestock fencing, carrying out infrastructure checks and rotating livestock in grazing paddocks. On Riddlesdown, the grazing area at Famet has been extended into an area of chalk grassland currently managed by hay cutting. This will support targeted grazing to increase the diversity of chalk grassland flora and invertebrates.
14. Volunteers have been assisting with a range of conservation and estate management tasks across the Commons this summer including repairs to

wooden steps, clearing vegetation overhanging rights of way, installing livestock fencing and removing holly and birch saplings on heathland. Livestock volunteers have also helped the rangers with daily welfare checks, livestock movement and sheep shearing.

15. Several byelaw boards have been removed due to structural damage and made safe by the rangers following an audit across all sites.
16. Wooden fencing has been erected around one of the woodland ponds on Coulsdon Common to reduce disturbance from dogs, encourage more aquatic plants and protect aquatic invertebrates from toxic insecticides used in common flea treatments.
17. Corporate volunteer groups have been helping rangers to remove ragwort from hay areas and grazing paddocks on Farthing Downs to avoid contaminating hay crop for cattle and neighbouring stables. The rangers also coordinated two large community volunteer days to help pull ragwort with support from residents, scout groups and existing volunteers from across all the four Coulsdon Commons. This has attracted several new permanent volunteers.
18. The rangers have been responding to the severe fire risk by reminding visitors not to have BBQs/fires, carrying out patrols of high-risk areas and mowing firebreaks at vulnerable sites to reduce the risk of fire spreading to property. Rangers have also been equipped with fire beaters and water containers in vehicles so that small fires and BBQs can be extinguished quickly.
19. A wildfire on land adjacent to Farthing Downs that is part of the South London Downs NNR (National Nature Reserve) was extinguished with help from City of London Rangers and Croydon Council. Due to the unprecedented volume of call outs to fires on 19 July, the Fire Service were unable to attend so rangers were quick to respond to prevent the fire from spreading to woodland and other grassland.
20. A contractor has been appointed to clear ash trees severely affected by ash dieback disease on New Hill and Kenley Common. In recent years we have been pro-actively managing diseased trees near high-use footpaths and bridleways following good working practices from forestry organisations taking a lead on this national issue.
21. A vet has confirmed that 23 out of 25 cows are pregnant during a check-up with the herd of Sussex cattle on Farthing Downs. The cows were also given new reflective leg bands to increase their visibility when moving on the road at night. Rangers are still engaging with visitors to reduce the risk of neospora in cattle caused by dog fouling.

22. Events during the period have included wildflower walks, evening bat walks and tours highlighting how we manage the sites for wildlife. A series of autumn walks, tours and activities have been organised to showcase local heritage, conservation grazing and wildlife. This is being run in conjunction with a UK-wide festival of National Nature Reserves to celebrate 70 years of this designation in UK environmental governance.
23. The temporary electric fencing installed on Farthing Downs to help protect nesting skylarks has been removed now that the breeding season has ended. Visitors have reacted well to the trial, and we have engaged with many people who had no knowledge of the presence of skylarks on the site. This has helped to remind dog owners to keep their pets under control to minimise disturbance to ground nesting birds.
24. The annual hay cut has been completed across grassland compartments of the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons. This forms part of the management of the chalk and neutral grasslands and helps to reduce excess nutrient that will benefit plant life. Some of the cut hay has been taken to the Merlewood Estate Yard for the livestock during the winter with the remainder being sold to cover the cost of the contract.
25. All sites received the Green Flag Award as well as the Green Heritage Award after judges carried out a mystery shop of each site. This marks the 15th year of Green Flag Awards for these sites.

Ashtead Common

26. Five work experience students were hosted during 18th – 22nd July. They experienced a range of activities such as boardwalk repair, cow checking, wildlife surveying and fixing a notice board.
27. A place is reserved with Sparsholt College for their October intake of apprentices doing the Countryside Worker level two qualification (was Environmental Conservation). The deadline for applications was August 10 and one candidate has been invited for interview.
28. The new Apprentice Ranger is expected to start on September 5.
29. Expenditure on OPM nest removal is likely to be around £3,000. Research suggests that over 50% of OPM nests now contain a parasitic fly. This together with other forms of predation appear to be controlling numbers.
30. The prolonged dry spell means that veteran tree surgery work cannot be undertaken this winter, for fear that stressed trees will respond poorly to the

work. The budget allocated for this work will be diverted instead to resilience measures such including work to fire breaks and residential boundaries.

Incidents

Burnham Beeches & Stoke Common

31. There were 10 incidents during the period. These included: three incidents of fly tipping, an incident when two cows escaped through a gate (they were returned unharmed); an ambulance attended a child who fell off a scooter (the child was able to go home), a visitor who fell from a mobility scooter; a car accident and a woman and a group of girls reported that they were followed by a man, a ranger attended but nothing untoward was seen. One dog out of 'effective control' was found worrying the cattle, the owner received a warning letter.

Ashtead Common

32. Five separate fires were started on Ashtead Common during August, four in the same location. The fire service was called to at least one of these, but fortunately the remaining four appear to have burnt themselves out before any significant damage was caused. In response the ranger team has stepped up patrols and cleared more firebreaks and access routes. Community Enforcement Officers from the neighbouring authority have patrolled and residents were written to asking them to report fires and suspicious behaviour.
33. Two graffiti incidents were recorded in July.

The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons

34. There were 9 incidents during the period up to 19th August. These included: indecent exposure to a volunteer on Riddlesdown, fly tipping, two drunken men found sleeping on a roadside verge, dirt bikers driving dangerously in the Farthing Downs car park and a dog attack on another dog on Kenley Common.
35. Three incidents were related to fires with rangers extinguishing a tree on fire on Coulsdon Common, a grassland fire on Riddlesdown and a heathland fire that was put out by the London Fire Brigade on West Wickham Common.

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