

Committee(s): Epping Forest and Commons Committee – For Decision Epping Forest Consultative – For Information	Dated: 13 October 2022 19 October 2022
Subject: Epping Forest Buffer Lands - Deer Management proposals 2022-23 (SEF 30/22)	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	2, 11, 12
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	Y
If so, how much?	£24,000 (after income)
What is the source of Funding?	Epping Forest Local Risk
Has this Funding Source been agreed upon with the Chamberlain's Department?	Y
Report of: Juliemma McLoughlin, Executive Director, Environment	For Decision: EF&CC For Information: EFCG
Report author: Paul Thomson, Epping Forest	

Summary

This report details and seeks approval for proposed deer management activity to be undertaken across 1,800 acres of Epping Forest Buffer Lands during the 2022-23 fallow deer season, in line with the independent external review of deer management of Epping Forest, incorporated into the Epping Forest Deer Management Strategy 2021-31, which was adopted by your Committee on 8 March 2021. The independent review indicated that the wild Fallow and Reeves Muntjac populations both in Epping Forest, and its associated Buffer Land, continue to increase with implications for the viability of the Forest's and Buffer Land's tree and shrub regeneration, continued commercial crop damage and the high number of Deer Vehicle Collisions.

Deer management activity during the January to March 2022 element of the August to April fallow deer season saw a reduction by 182 deer against estimated Fallow deer numbers of 1,500, and Reeves Muntjac, numbers of 350 as a phased approach to realise a sustainable stocking rate of 6-8 deer per square kilometre providing a total sustainable herd size on the Buffer Land of 150-200 deer. As part of the phased reduction in herd size recommended by the independent review, this report proposes a further 2022-23 season reduction of approximately 250 deer as a further step to providing a sustainable Fallow deer population.

Work on managing the deer population will be undertaken in full cooperation with neighbouring landowners and seeks trial approval for limited management activity on Forest Land at the Warren Plantation to address deer populations feeding on adjacent tenanted farmland.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Support continued progress towards a further reduction in Buffer Land deer numbers by 250 individual, to an eventual recommended stocking rate of 6-8 deer/square kilometre to support positive improvements in habitat regeneration, crop viability and safety on the public highway.
- Promote continued engagement with local landowners to work collaboratively to further understand and control the deer population.
- To trial carefully risk assessed deer management operations on Forest Land at Warren Plantation to reduce crop damage on adjacent tenanted farmland.
- Approve the creation of an Epping Forest Deer Oversight Group comprising of Members and Officers to report to Committee on the annual management of deer.

Main Report

Background

1. There is a widespread scientific consensus that wild deer populations continue to increase in both number and geographic range throughout the UK. The two truly native deer species - Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) - are no longer present in Epping Forest and its associated Buffer Land. Both the northern areas of the Forest and the 1,800 acres (700 hectares) of Buffer Land estate primarily consisting of Warlies Park; Woodredon and Copped Hall currently provide habitat for two non-native species of deer – the widely naturalised southern European Fallow deer (*Dama dama*) and the relatively recently introduced Reeves' Muntjac deer (*Muntiacus reevesi*) originating from China.
2. Deer numbers have fluctuated dramatically over the last century. Around 200 fallow deer were present in the Forest in 1900 with a further 50 in adjoining copses. Numbers in the Forest fell to 50 during the 1950s, whereas the 1990s saw a dramatic increase in the number of wild Fallow deer, particularly in the Buffer Land Estates. Increasing deer populations caused significant damage through the browsing, grazing and trampling of both crops and woodland regeneration and have caused a growing number of Deer-Vehicle Collisions.
3. The 6,500-acre area encompassing Epping-River Lee-Nazeing-Harlow area has seen wholesale population growth of both Fallow and Muntjac deer species since 2017 with circa 1,500 Fallow and 350 Reeves Muntjac identified during the 2021-2022 season utilising several survey tools. A reduction of both species is recommended, such a reduction would reduce damage to crops and woodland regeneration while minimising the incidence of Deer-Vehicle Collisions (DVCs) on local roads. Over the 26 years since the introduction of the strategy, the target Fallow deer population of 200 has not always been achieved with deer numbers in recent years thriving at circa ten times that rate.

4. Deer Vehicle Collisions (DVCs) incidents were previously monitored by the Deer Initiative, a broad partnership of statutory, voluntary and private organisations seeking to sustainably manage wild deer and Essex County Council as the Highways Authority. DVCs provide both a valuable insight into the risks posed to motorists and can provide qualified confirmation of overall local deer populations. DVCs between 2002 and 2007 showed a steady decline in numbers both for Essex and the Epping Forest area. Between 2003 and 2005, 26 DVCs were recorded in the area of the Forest. Since 2008, the number has increased and has remained relatively constant, averaging 64 DVCs annually, which suggests annual counts may be underestimating the overall size of the deer population. This notion is further supported by the upward trend in DVCs since 2015 averaging over 230 reported incidents per annum. It is of note that these are only the incidents reported to the on-duty Epping Forest Charity and Essex Police who are tasked to deal with such incidents, a further study would need to take place to establish more conclusive figures. Fallow deer continue to be the primary animal involved in DVCs throughout the region. It is widely accepted that this is due in part to the severity of a collision involving a Fallow (40kg) in comparison to that of the much smaller Muntjac (14kg) which is far more likely to immobilise a vehicle and cause injury to its occupants.

Current Position

5. The independent review that established the Deer Management Strategy 2021-31 assessed the deer control, not just in terms of deer numbers, but in terms of the measurable impact on woodland vegetation. The consultant's field assessments indicate that the current level of deer, and deer distribution, are causing a high level of damage to the Forest, Buffer Land woodlands and neighbouring crops. In particular, the condition of the ancient semi-natural woodlands requires that new cull targets for both Fallow deer and Reeves Muntjac need to be set at a much higher level than in the past. It is also recognised that the deer populations range more freely beyond the 1996 assessment area and consideration should be given to coordination over a wider Epping-River Lee-Nazeing-Harlow area.
6. The initial findings by Epping Forest deer staff are that there is a much higher level of damage to woodlands than at first thought by both Fallow and Muntjac deer and that cull targets should be set much higher than in the past.
7. In Initial surveys conducted between 2010-2015 it was assessed that very low numbers of mature male Fallow deer had been recorded. A suitable suggestion for this would be based on the over-emphasis of culling immature Fallow deer males since 2006/7 and perhaps the excessive culling of mature male fallow Deer. The 2021/22 survey results indicate that this is no longer the case with mature Fallow bucks being observed ubiquitously throughout Epping Forest, Buffer lands and neighbouring estates.
8. The chiller unit which is located in The Warren compound has encountered several issues with maintaining the required temperature to chill significant

numbers of deer carcasses. There is currently in place a plan to modify the unit further for future employment.

9. The current staff recruitment restrictions associated with the City Corporation's Target Operating Model (TOM) has restricted the Charity's ability to replace specialist deer staff with permanent contracted roles. The Charity has been fortunate to recruit a number of casual deer managers with extensive deer management experience as an interim measure. The establishment of the deer manager group has seen certain costs have been mitigated by the Charity, such as, ammunition, cost of specialist kit and equipment including rifles, specialist clothing, courses for qualifications and training, this is all financed by the individual staff.
10. The paid wages for the group members are partly offset by income from carcass sales. This season the sale of 182 carcasses raised £3,828.27 which leaves a predicted future income of £1,500 for the 40 deer to be managed over the next season. The venison industry has been adversely affected by COVID-19 and there continues to be a low demand amongst UK consumers, consequently venison prices are low and look to remain so for the foreseeable future. The sale of venison therefore tends to only offset some of the costs of the deer management group.
11. Two Verderers have attended feedback sessions with deer management staff to reflect on the challenges facing the future deer management across the deer sanctuary and the Buffer Land. The last session provided opportunities to inspect the venison handling facility and management records. Verderers have indicated a willingness to serve on an oversight body regarding the management of deer and wider engagement with neighbouring landowners.

Options

12. Your Committee has a range of options regarding the future management of fallow deer on the Buffer Land estate.
 - i. Approve a reduction of 250 deer across the 2022/23 to maintain a sustainable herd of 150-200 fallow deer across the Buffer Land estate, while reducing Reeves Muntjac as low as possible. **This option is recommended.**
 - ii. Consider a reduced deer management figure which will increase the number of years taken to achieve a sustainable herd figure of 150-200, resulting in the overall reduction of larger aggregate deer numbers and increased damage to the Forest, Buffer Land woodland and commercial crops, while potentially increasing the number of DVCs. **This option is not recommended.**
 - iii. Withdraw from active deer management control altogether resulting in potential herd welfare issues, increased damage to the Forest, Buffer land

woodland and commercial crops, while increasing the number of DVCs.
This option is not recommended.

Proposals

13. In line with the independent review, it is proposed to continue with a stepped active deer management working at a high tempo to achieve a sustainable deer herd that will reduce ecological, commercial and public safety impacts.

Key Data

14. The existing Southwest Fallow deer herd is estimated at 1,500 individuals ranging between the Epping-River Lee-Nazeing-Harlow area... The population saw a reduction of 182 individuals, representing 12% of the existing population at a cost of 17,395.40 after income from venison sales of £3,602.10. Detailed data gathered from the 2021/22 season is contained in the appended review report including cull statistics, wage bill, Income generation from venison sales, and area of cull impact.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

15. The venison industry is a product of deer management and recreational stalking, reflecting continuing low demand amongst UK consumers, currently, venison prices are low and stand in real terms, at circa 50% of the price in 2019, although prices have tentatively improved recently with the release of covid restrictions. The sale of venison, therefore, tends to only defray some of the costs of deer management, rather than provide a positive cost incentive for active management.

Financial Implications

16. Deer culling is a surprisingly labour-intensive activity. It is estimated that deer control activity can be estimated at 0.5 staff days per deer. Taking a management figure of 182 which equates to 645.45 hours costing £26,860. The provision of rifles and ammunition is born by the individual at a significant saving to the organisation. Specialist clothing, vehicles, high seats, training and game larder facilities all are additional but necessary items for conducting deer activities at a cost to the organisation.
17. Currently, casual deer staff carry out the deer management activity. All carcasses remain the property of Epping Forest. Deer can be purchased at the rate of £1.10 per kilo which is in line with wholesale game dealer rates.

Resource implications

18. All of the licensed stalkers are fully qualified to the minimum of DSC2 and hold all necessary firearms and food hygiene certificates to legally carry out the control measures. They all have suitable insurance cover to indemnify the City of London and operate under annually reviewed risk assessments in

conjunction with dynamic risk assessments whilst conducting activities which cover all tasks involved with culling the deer as humanely as possible.

19. The Deer Managers provide all their equipment and are obliged to follow policies laid down by the Charity in respect of numbers of deer culled, times/days when stalking is permitted, areas allocated to each deer manager and records to be kept. All stalkers are suitably qualified and familiarised with all vehicles and equipment utilised for deer operations and work in a team to mutually support each other from a health and safety perspective.

Legal Implications

20. Under section 4 of the Epping Forest Act 1878, Deer on Forest Land are considered to be the property of the Conservators 'to be preserved as objects of ornament in the Forest'. Outside the Forest, Deer are wild animals, or *ferae naturae* under common law, and are not owned by anyone. In England and Wales, the landowner has the right to kill or take game on his or her land. The landowner may also extend authority, known as Page 75 'permission', to other people without restriction provided they observe the law in terms of close seasons.
21. **Risk implications** - There is an increased risk of vandalism to deer management infrastructure, particularly in more remote areas. High seats are regularly safety inspected under the Working at Height Regulations 2005 and secured to ensure no unlawful removal.
22. As lead-free ammunition is phased out; deer managers will have to pursue a non-lead option to continue conducting culling activities. It is widely accepted that at present, the non-lead variant ammunition requires a larger calibre firearm to achieve an effective and humane cull. Whilst initial research is positive from the industry, further research is currently being carried out by group members to establish the ideal minimum calibre and ammunition for achieving the task.
23. **Charity implications** - Epping Forest is a registered charity (number 232990). Charity Law obliges Members to ensure that the decisions they take concerning the Charity must be taken in the best interests of the Charity.

Conclusion

24. The deer management reductions undertaken during the 2021/22 season have made a positive contribution to implementing the Deer Review recommendations of a stocking rate of 6-8 fallow deer per square kilometre in the Buffer Land. Following careful survey, a recommendation of a further cull of 250 deer is recommended for the 2022/23 season, to continue to reduce the negative browsing pressure placed on the regeneration of Forest habitats and Buffer Land woodlands, alongside damage to commercial crops and the public health, animal welfare and insurance considerations associated with Deer Vehicle Collisions.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – 2021/2022 Wild deer management statistics and cost breakdown.

Background Papers

- Deer Management SEF 80/96
- Ueckermann and Hansen 'Der DamWild' (The Fallow Deer) (1983)
- Conservation and Management of Deer in Epping Forest and its Buffer Land. Estates. Dr J Langbein (April 1996) (2007) & (2009)
- Epping Forest Management Plan 1998/2003 & 2004/ 2010
- Epping Forest Buffer Land Action Plan 1998/2003
- The Deer Initiative 'Epping Forest and Buffer Lands Deer Management Strategy Review Summary' (2020)

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