

Committee(s): Open Spaces and City Gardens Committee	Date(s): 13 th February 2023
Subject: Director's Report	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 11 & 12
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	N/A
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?	N/A
Report of: Juliemma McLoughlin, Executive Director, Environment	For discussion
Report author: Sally Agass, interim Director of Natural Environment	

Summary

This report provides the Committee Members with an update on matters relating to the work of the Natural Environment Division of the Environment Department since the last Committee in December 2022.

Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- Note the contents of the report.
- Provide feedback on the contents of the report

Main Report

Charity Review

Members are asked to note that the Natural Environment Charity Review Progress Report will be presented to the March Epping Forest Committee.

Members will recall that the review has four items, of which the strategic approach and matters on governance particularly any amendments to the Terms of Reference of this Committee will be the subject of consultation at a workshop in February 2023. Members will be advised of the date.

TOM Phase 2 is progressing to plan with the Corporate Services Committee planned for the 17th January 2023 and Members will be verbally advised of the outcome

The draft strategies have now been brought together in an overarching document which will be discussed at the February workshop.

Key News from our Charities

Hampstead Heath

Tree planting for the Queen's green canopy is taking place in Hampstead Heath with over 33 trees planted during January and March.

A recent survey of bat boxes on Hampstead Heath uncovered several bats with three species identified including Common and Soprano Pipistrelles and a Noctule.

Work is progressing with the implementation of capital projects including the refurbishment of the athletic track at Parliament Hill, the ponds infrastructure on the Heath and the playground at Queen's Park.

A number of events took place at Hampstead Heath during the autumn and festive period which included a Remembrance Day event, a Christmas fayre and the traditional Christmas and new year day swims at the ponds.

Epping Forest

The Commons

Contract teams have completed a range of tasks across The Commons during the period; CSS funded wood pasture and heathland restoration programmes at Burnham Beeches and haloing ancient trees at Ashted Common. Contractors and Rangers have completed the high priority Tree Safety program for the Burnham Beeches and contractors have started work on a £15,000 tree safety program at West Wickham and Coulsdon Common (WWCC). Rangers using a specialist remote controlled machine safely restored optimum conditions for rare wildflowers and invertebrates on some of the steepest chalk grassland slopes on Kenley Common and Riddlesdown.

Volunteers have delivered 2679 hours of work in November and December, the equivalent of £ 26,790 using the Heritage Fund's matched funding calculator. Works have varied widely from completing the restoration of an old horse drawn timber lifter at Ashted Common to scrub and heathland management on all sites and specialist survey roles. Working in partnership with the Geological Society of London, 20 volunteers over two weekends restored a geological trail at the base of the Riddlesdown quarry. This will enable visiting scientists, students, and engineers to better understand the structure of London's chalk. End of year volunteer Christmas thank you events were hosted by the City Corporation at each site.

With the support of a private donation two new Exmoor ponies were acquired in December and are now grazing Stoke Common along with our existing two ponies for the winter. Across the sites cattle have been TB tested and are now in winter quarters with our first calves due in Early January at West Wickham and Coulsdon Common. Following the launch of their donation scheme in December, Ashted Common have already raised £1,611, including one donation of £1,500 while Burnham Beeches received a £3000 donation to help towards ancient tree management during the period.

The City Engineers Team completed delivery of the £17,000 Woodlands Road Bridge strengthening works at Ashted Common. This will allow large vehicles, including fire engines, to access the Common more easily. A new water pipe has been installed to 13-Acre Bury on New Hill at WWCC enabling Sussex cattle to graze around 30ha of recently restored chalk grassland using the No Fence collars. Thames water have made good progress with identifying a potential solution to the sewage overflow problems in Farnham Common and will be progressing a feasibility study. In the meantime, they are monitoring the impact of sewage on the Nile stream.

Following a question at the Epping Forest and Commons Committee in November 2022 on the lower-than-expected car park income at WWCC, the reduced income is forecast to be 50% lower than budgeted (predicted to be £29,000 this year with an income target of £58,000). The main issue appears to be that post covid not as many people are visiting the sites coupled with reduced income from Riddlesdown Common, where there is readily available free parking on the side roads which users have been using in preference to paying for onsite parking.

West Ham Park – Former Nursery Site

Notification of the disposal of the former nursery site adjacent to West Ham Park was made via a section 121 notice (under the Charities Act 2011) in March 2022. A section 105 Order (under the same Act) to allow part of the proceeds of the disposal to be received in kind by the provision of new operational facilities was obtained in August 2022. The commercial agreement with the preferred developer is currently being finalised.

Learning

The learning programme has engaged over 28,000 participants at Epping Forest, Hampstead Heath and West Ham Park so far this year. We are on track to meet our engagement targets, and school numbers have returned to pre-pandemic levels.

The school programme reached students in some of London's most deprived boroughs, including Tower Hamlets, Newham, Hackney, Waltham Forest and Haringey. Students take part in a variety of nature-based activities which build fusion skills, confidence and wellbeing as well as supporting the National Curriculum. The programme includes bespoke SEND school provision.

Two young people will be joining the learning team for work experience programme as part of the City of London Academies Trust Pre-apprenticeship Academy. This programme provides an opportunity for pupils at risk of exclusion from school to get a fresh start and develop their fusion skills and resilience. The students will be placed at one of the team's play centres, supporting young children to learn through play.

Students from pupil referral units visited Epping Forest in December, with further visits at the Heath planned for January.

Operational Property review

The Corporation is currently conducting a Corporate Property Review that is running alongside the Natural Environment Property Asset Review.

In order to progress with the Natural Environment Review the ownership of each asset needs to be established alongside any restrictive covenants or limitations on its use placed on the asset. This work is in progress and is supported by the Corporation Property Lawyer and this work will be made available to the Corporate Operational Property Review Group. With the completion of the baseline information a paper will be brought to this Committee to present the options for the future management of our assets. Please note two separate pieces of work are also in transit to better understand the treatment and management of the buffer lands and the lands classified as 'Pink Land'.

The nine Natural Environment Charities currently list 142 property assets. Once our baseline information gathering is complete each Charity will then have a complete register, including Title Deeds, registration numbers and history of any transfers or change of ownerships or restrictive covenants.

This base line information will be reported to this committee in midsummer 2023 as this information will inform the committee of what we can or cannot do in relation to each property in terms of income generation or alternate uses of the properties.

In addition, valuations of each property will be needed from City Surveyors to ensure that the assets are correctly shown in the annual accounts for each charity. Alongside the valuations, condition surveys on the prioritised properties can identify the refurbishment costs needed to bring properties back into use. Each property will be treated on a case -by -case basis and the best future use determined. For example, if a property is owned by the Corporation, they will have the right to sell for a capital receipt, subject to any restrictive covenants etc but officers will be able to present alternative uses if that is in the best interests of the charity.

Byelaws

The Natural Environment Division have established a Byelaw Review Group to examine the byelaws for each of the open spaces. However, due to the pressures on staff and the timing of the TOM Phase 2 proposals, this work will progress at a slower pace. The Comptroller and City Solicitor produced some detailed proposals for Epping Forest, which was selected as a pilot project, last year. The proposals cover topical issues of general application, such as the use of drones and personal electric vehicles, as well as local matters that are specific to Epping.

There is also an opportunity to revoke byelaws that are no longer needed, and to update some of the historical language, whilst focussing on those changes that will have the biggest impact. These proposals are still being considered. The issues

raised are complex, and may in some case be contentious, which is a reason for taking our time to complete this review. Any new byelaws (which create new criminal offences) must be necessary and proportionate and comply with the relevant statutory framework and the available guidance. Further reports will be brought back to committee in due course. We will also need to liaise with The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and carry out a period of public consultation at the appropriate stages. It is hoped that the pilot project at Epping Forest can be progressed over the summer and autumn, followed by the other open spaces in order of priority.

Projects Update

Monument Update

The Monument, is a visitor attraction, scientific instrument and heritage feature in the City of London, operated by Tower Bridge staff on behalf of the Natural Environment Division, who are the asset owner. Officers are exploring one current opportunity to work with the private sector, creating a Monument visitor centre in the immediate vicinity. The opportunity could result in a visitor centre constructed and fitted out at little or no cost to the Corporation. Several positive meetings with the prospective development partner and their architectural consultants have been held. Both parties have agreed to further test the viability of a proposed visitor centre by commissioning a feasibility study to better understand the space requirements, the potential operators and the business model options for the facility. The appointed consultant team commenced work in December 2022.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

All projects and works delivered by our Charities contribute towards the achievement of the three aims set out in the City of London Corporate Plan 2018-23: Contribute to a flourishing society, Support a thriving economy and Shape outstanding environments.

A key strategic link is the Climate Action Strategy, and we work with the Departmental and Corporate teams to deliver those elements allocated to the Natural Environment Department,

Financial Implications

Not applicable

Resource Implications

Not directly applicable

Climate Implications

Not directly applicable

Legal Implications

Not applicable at this time but will be reported to Committee as part of the Charity Review

Risk Implications

Not applicable

Equality Implications

No impact.

Security Implications

Not applicable

Appendices

None

Sally Agass

Interim Director, Environment Department.

E: sally.agass@cityoflondon.gov.uk