

Committee(s): Epping Forest and Commons Committee – For information	Dated: 23/11/2023
Subject: The Commons – Assistant Directors Update August-September 2023	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	2,5,11 & 12
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	No
If so, how much?	N/A
What is the source of Funding?	
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?	N/A
Report of: Bob Roberts , Interim Executive Director Environment Department	For Information
Report author: Geoff Sinclair, Assistant Director The Commons	

Summary

The purpose of this report is to summarise activities across The Commons between August and September 2023. Key data is presented in a dashboard format with further detail given in the main report.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

Main Report

Background

1. Appendix 1 contains a graphical representation of financial data to the end of September 2023 (period 06-24) These figures are The Commons Local Risk only and do not include non-local risk elements such as City Surveyors projects.
2. The first table in appendix 1 gives actual expenditure to the end of September 2023 against the whole year budget, subdivided by type and Division of Service (DOS), where BB is Burnham Beeches, SC is Stoke Common, WW is West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons and AC is Ashted Common. This is further summarised graphically in the chart 'Budget and Actuals by Type', across all the DOS combined for this financial year.
3. There are no significant discrepancies between the budget and actual figures to note. Government grant income figures are still being impacted by the late

payment of grant income for the 2022 calendar year and payments for 2023 are yet to be fully received. Transport expenditure for this year includes spending in 2023/24 on new vehicles at Burnham Beeches and West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons which are due to be charged to a previously agreed capital project for the purchase of the vehicles.

The Commons Key Data – Appendix 2

4. **Car Parking Income (Fig 1):** The most recent car park information is still to be uploaded and will be reported in the next report
5. **Volunteering (Fig 4):** Volunteers undertook 2075 hours (296 seven-hour days) of work during the period, the equivalent of £20,750 using the National Lottery Heritage Fund's match funding calculator. Overall, in the six months since April, volunteer time represents the equivalent of £78,160 of much appreciated 'matched funding' from local people. At the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons, volunteer tasks included hazel coppicing, woodland glade creation and a final ragwort pulling day. 644 of the total hours were achieved at Ashted Common, where volunteers engaged in tasks to enable grazing, enhance firebreaks and manage scrub.
6. **Energy use and Production (Fig 2):** PV energy production was down by 11% in August/September on the five-year average.
7. **Accidents:** Accident data is given on figures 7 (Accidents by month) and 8 (Accidents by type). Overall number of accidents is low with 11 accidents recorded, however, this is above average for the Commons where we would expect around 4 for the same period. During the current period one accident involved a slow vehicle collision with a COL Landover with no injuries or damage to the COL vehicle and a cyclist falling from their bicycle when manoeuvring around a work team and requiring first aid from the team.

Additional Important Updates

Wayleaves and Licences

8. Across the City Commons several wayleave and licence issues have been pending resolution for a while. Over this period the Assistant Director has initiated work on these, along with colleagues from the City Surveyors and Town Clerks Department. In total there are around six substantive issues to work through with the sums of money involved relatively small and the main issues revolving around property damage and ownership.

Rural Payments Agency Independent Agricultural Appeals Panel

9. The Assistant Director and Conservation Officer represented the City Corporation at the Rural Payments Agency's (RPA) Independent Agricultural Appeals Panel. This was the final stage in the long-standing appeal to the RPA on them changing the payment schedule for the agreed Countryside Stewardship Scheme at

Burnham Beeches. The outcome of the appeal will be notified from the Minister of Agriculture's office around December 2023.

Training and Development

10. At the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons, various members of the ranger team attended training courses as part of their Continued Professional Development. The courses included NPTC polesaw, Lantra woodchipper & NPTC Safe use of pesticides. The training forms part of a local commitment to ensure each member of the ranger team acquires a useful new skill with a recognised qualification, during 2023-24.
11. At Ashted Common the entire ranger team completed an accredited course in vegetation fire run by LANTRA in association with the Forestry Commission. They also undertook an NPTC accredited refresher in tractor and grass cutting machinery. One team member went on an advanced bat handling course and another completed accredited training in herbicide and pesticide use.

Events and educational activities

12. Brownies and Cubs enjoyed Bat Walks on West Wickham Common. The ancient oak pollards were highlighted by the rangers leading these walks as important homes for bats and other nocturnal species. Pipistrel bats put on exciting displays, swooping low over the children, whilst tawney owls hooted throughout the woodland. A bat evening for the public also took place on Kenley Common, and was attended by 18 people including several small children who were fascinated by 2 hours of constant bat flights, and hearing their echolocation sounds through the bat detectors.
13. On Farthing Downs Historic England joined the ranger and the Friends of Farthing Downs residents' group, to lead a walk celebrating the life of Brian Hope Taylor who excavated the Saxon burial mounds on the Downs in the late 1940's, discovering numerous skeletons along with associated grave goods. His work on the Downs hugely improved our knowledge of the rich archaeological history of Farthing Downs leading to it's designation as London's largest Scheduled Monument.
14. The largest single event in Ashted Common's calendar – the 10k run - occurred on August 30. A license was issued for £444 to enable approximately 200 runners to take part. There were also two guided walks during this period, one looking at bats and the other grazing.
15. In August approximately 800 Burnham Joggers passed through the northern part of Burnham Beeches. The license for this activity was awarded at £1,500 plus there was around £450 in additional car park income. An event for 150 Herts Orienteers in September achieved £444 plus around £240 in additional car park income. The Conservation Officer led a walk during the period for MSc students from Oxford Brookes University

16. Small scale events run during this period at Burnham Beeches have proved popular. These included two sessions looking at creatures of the night, and the ever popular film locations walk.
17. At Burnham Beeches the Community Engagement Rangers held a series of events including a week of activities. They attended events such as the Farnham Common Apple Day and supported Slough Hub with events and walks to promote Slough parks as alternative destinations to Burnham Beeches.

Recruitment and Apprentices

18. The West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons welcomed a new Apprentice Ranger to the team in September. He will be with us for 23 months learning the day to day skills needed to be a ranger. Sparsholt College will lead him through his apprenticeship and providing him with classroom lectures covering, amongst other topics, Countryside Law, Health & Safety and wildlife Ecology. He will also acquire some important technical skills with industry recognised accreditation including brushcutters, chainsaws and First Aid.
19. The third round of recruitment for the Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Conservation Officer failed to find a suitable candidate. Revised approaches to this recruitment are being identified with the support of Business Support Team and other colleagues

Livestock

20. Sadly, the West Wickham and Coulsdon Commons lost three unborn calves in September, probably due to *Neospora*. *Neospora caninum* is a parasite carried in dog faeces and has been the highest cause of abortions in cattle throughout the UK over the past several years. Infected cattle are three to seven times more likely to abort their calves than uninfected cattle. There is no way to treat the infection. Our cattle are blood tested every year and any cow found to have the disease must be taken out of the breeding herd and prematurely culled. The disease cannot be passed from cow to cow but can be passed down genetically from a mother to her calf. Posters highlighting the risk and instructing dog walkers to pick up after their pets, are displayed around the sites.
21. The ranger team at the Coulsdon Commons replaced sections of dilapidated livestock fencing on Farthing Downs and on Kenley Common. Jacob sheep and Sussex cows are now grazing various species-rich downland areas across all four of the Coulsdon Commons and the goats have returned to Riddlesdown Quarry.
22. The 10 Belted Galloway cattle at Ashted Common returned temporarily to their owner – Surrey Wildlife Trust – for TB testing. They will come back in October for an early autumn graze of the scrub, grassland area.

Project work

23. The last section of the Stoke Common fire break was cleared as part of a planned eight-year rotation.
24. Orders have been placed for pollard restoration works at both Burnham Beeches and Ashtead Common.

Survey and monitoring

25. The field work element of Ashtead Common's latest saproxylic invertebrate survey has concluded and has yielded interesting results. For example, a rare and illusive species called *Lacon querceus*, that hitherto was only found at Windsor Great Park, was identified.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – The Commons Local Risk Financial Summary
Appendix 2 – The Commons Key Data

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